

A CREATIVE REPORT

by 500

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
THE WEEK-END GUEST	8
A VISITOR FOR TEA	19
THE LAST SWEET SOUNDS OF MAY	32
AN INCIDENT IN POCANTA	38
THE MIDDLETON MUSE	63
ACKNOWLEDGMENT	90

INTRODUCTION

Although the stories in this report were written with no particular thematic emphasis in mind, upon examination, one may be seen to emerge: the theme of incommunicability. The awkwardness of the word itself befits what it would express.

A brief definitive paraphrase of incommunicability in literature is this: We are alone. Each of us occupies his own little space in time. Language is our human attempt to link ourselves, meaningfully, to each other; incommunicability is the failure of that attempt.

Perhaps more than most, serious writers must be particularly aware of the problem, for meaningful communication is surely their great aim. In seeking to broaden and deepen the powers of their language, they have explored new techniques: stream-of-consciousness, impressionism, imagism, supreme suggestibility. And they have exposed the old enemy of incommunicability to the light of direct statement; so their attack on it is thematic as well as technical. The nature and permanence of their victories, however, rests with their readers in their own age and ages after. Certainly this problem deserves much fuller treatment and documentation than it can be given within the scope of this brief introductory essay; only a few outstanding examples of its literary expression may be cited here.

In twentieth century fiction, the direct, stated acknowledgment of this failure is frequent enough to establish incommunicability as a motif. But whether stated or not, incommunicability is always just there, and these direct statements of it are only symptomatic. But the very directness of these passages provides a beginning point from which to explore the meaning and the expression of incommunicability in literature.

A comparison of the treatments of this motif provides one key to the nature of the problem. In Conrad's Victory, Heyst and Lena are shown to be painfully aware in themselves that certain avenues of communication are forever closed to them. In Conrad's treatment, incommunicability is a self-built wall which Heyst can neither scale nor destroy. His very will is imprisoned by it. Lena, locked from him by her own feelings of self-doubt and intended sacrifice is as helpless as he to break through. At one point, Conrad makes this explicit statement of the problem:

...in holding her surrendered hand he had found a closer communion than they had ever achieved before. But even then there still lingered in him a sense of incompleteness. . . which it seemed would never be overcome. . . the fatal imperfection of all the gifts of life, which makes of them a delusion and a snare.¹

Conrad writes thus to describe Heyst's self-imposed isolation; but it may be broadened to define the imposed and impenetrable isolation of every human being.

While Conrad seems to stand in distant and muted awe of incommunicability, Joyce immerses himself in its very nature. In Ulysses he attempts the new language of the stream of consciousness. In his treatment, the technical manifestation and the thematic expression of incommunicability are inextricably bound up together. Language becomes a transverse line that would cut through not only the many levels of a single consciousness, but would angularly cross every plane of human existence and intersect at every point in time. Within this larger attempt, Joyce develops through Stephen Dedalus and Leopold Bloom an intense, germinal form of incommunicability: that which rages and cowers in the Self. This is surely one force that compels Stephen to seek his psychic father - a penetrable extension of himself. And it is the incommunicability

¹ Joseph Conrad, Victory, Random House: The Modern Library Edition, pp. 200 - 201.

of Bloom's marital and racial exile that permits him to accept Stephen. Bloom's isolation is not so cruel as Heyst's, for he brings to it a keener awareness, a finer sensibility. As Joyce delineates incommunicability in Bloom, it is not so terrible as it is poignant. Perhaps the most touching expression of this is in the scene where Bloom listens alone and revels in himself to the singing of Stephen's father. Amidst, and yet always apart from the others who listen, Bloom remains silent when they rush to praise the singer. But Joyce's description of Bloom at this moment says more of him than any effusion of words he might have given him to speak or that he might have written about him: "But Bloom sang dumb..."²

A very different approach than either Joyce's or Conrad's to the problem of incommunicability is seen in Forster's A Passage to India. This novel is impregnated with the failure to communicate but it is manifested in the national, racial, and religious barriers between people and groups of people. Though this aspect of incommunicability is hardly less vital, it is more easily observed and understood. A Passage to India is composed of a series of misunderstandings and their consequences. However, within this broad framework is embedded one of the most arresting particularizations of the problem. This is in the episode of Mrs. Moore's experience in the Marabar Caves. The caves actually become a tangible symbol of incommunicability, for within them a prayer or a scream will resound identically. When Mrs. Moore discovers this, she recedes from life and its empty noises and dies. In the caves she has seemingly discovered the ultimate horror of incommunicability.

The illustrations of the problem given thus far have been drawn from the

² James Joyce, Ulysses, Random House: The Modern Library Giant Edition, p. 272.

twentieth century English novel only. Countless others could be taken from that area alone. When this is compounded by as many instances in both twentieth century European and American fiction and other genre, the scope and depth of incommunicability as a theme of contemporary literature is readily assumed.

However, the principal purpose of this introductory essay is to analyze the stories of this report in terms of this theme. Therefore, the examples already cited serve only as an extremely brief and by no means exhaustive explication of incommunicability. Recognizing this, the stories themselves should now be examined.

Each of these five stories reflects some aspect of the problem of incommunicability. The simplest manifestation of it is seen in the least serious of the group: "The Middleton Muse." In his relationship with Pierre Bohne, Sog Small is deliberately incommunicative. In his own words, he has nothing to say to "a furriner" - a foreigner who inspires in Sog an admixture of pride, contempt, suspicion, and curiosity. Were curiosity not uppermost in Sog's nature, rapport between Pierre and him would never have been established; indeed, their muse would never have come to exist. But this rapport deepens and opens out only with the aid of Sog's "good likker," and Pierre's admission that he is not foreign, but almost as American as Sog himself. However, as noted earlier, the tone of this story is extremely light, and, in keeping with this, the problem of incommunicability is superficial and easily solved.

In "The Week-end Guest," incommunicability is present on quite a different level. Here the problem is real: a husband and wife are shown who are completely out of touch with each other. Ironically, the story is written largely in dialogue - they talk a great deal, but neither of them says what could elicit real attention or understanding in the other. By the end of the story, what little commerce there is between them is further blocked by the gross liberties

the wife has taken in revealing their private lives to a friend. The husband is the real victim of incommunicability: whatever he might do in reaction to his wife's utter lack of discretion would be but additional material for her friend's "notebook."

In the third story, "A Visitor for Tea," the pathos of incommunicability is equally acute for both the boy and his aunt. The boy is too young to see beyond his aunt's scarred face and harsh treatment of him. When he is given the opportunity to see beyond, in the scene where he watches her practice serving tea, he is only frightened and puzzled. Opposed to this, his aunt is too confined by her excruciating awareness of her own physical ugliness to hope the boy might truly love her. Her only defense is a fanatic belief in God, which leads her to try to teach the boy to equate goodness with ugliness, and sin with beauty. Instinctively, the boy cannot accept this.

In the middle section of this story, communication between the boy and his mother is no better. The tone, the very words she uses with him echo her life as a prostitute. He, of course, is not aware of this, but he does sense in her a fundamental coldness. He has no more real conception of what "Mother" is after he has seen her than he had before her visit.

Throughout these two sections of the story, the boy has exhibited his own peculiar defenses against his isolation. He has evolved various charms and rituals to help him meet the ordinary emotions and functions of life. But by the end of the story even these fail him. His aunt has devised a new defense; and for the boy, this is far more terrible than the sight of her face. The aunt cannot know she has only further alienated this child as she will surely drive from her the child about to come into her possession. The boy cannot understand this new horror of his aunt's and is left enveloped by fear. Which of these two is more pathetic in his isolation?

The fourth story of this report explores the consciousness of a man who is haunted by his failure to communicate to the extent that he fails to relate himself meaningfully to his world. And this, to the extreme that he has been removed from the world of normality. As he is seen here, he is venturing once more into this world, only to be defeated again by his old failure. He sees the rain flowing in the gutter and is forced to remember a painful experience with his mother in which he was utterly unable to make her understand him. From this memory, he seeks shelter in Bennie's. Ironically, Bennie's is a place that seems to threaten him with personal annihilation. His attempts to communicate with the attendants there are futile - they mistake him for a drunk. The terrible effect of the isolation of incommunicability for him is that he is driven to remove himself from the world he had so desperately longed for.

In the concluding story of this report, "An Incident in Pocanta," incommunicability can be seen operating on several levels at once. The narrator is ridden with a sense of her total isolation from the very people she once envisioned herself loving and helping. All that is left to her is her role as the cynical observer. And what she observes in this story reveals a reverse twist of incommunicability. For here, "communication" is rampant, but so thoroughly corrupted that it destroys two people. A secret becomes a rumor; a rumor becomes gossip; and gossip becomes the damning and distorted "Truth" of Pocanta. Through each of these transitions, incommunicability is always present. The innocent words of Ellie Jacobs to Alice Meech, or those of Frank Jacobs to Reverend Johnson are twisted against their speakers - without changing the words themselves. The Reverend Johnson illustrates another facet of ineffectual communication. He is a man for whom there is but one, all-consuming reality: his Christian Duty. Whatever he confronts in experience, he reshapes to this frighteningly narrow mold - whether it be the misery of his wife, or the honest

distress of Frank Jacobs.

Jacobs himself represents yet another aspect. Here is a man who for so long has shut himself away from any significant commerce with people, that when he must communicate he can only fail. He can neither learn the truth from his daughter's young lover, nor convey what part of the truth he knows to the Reverend. When these various forms of incommunicability commingle and interact upon each other, language is seen at its most irresponsible, and consequently, at its deadliest.

Thus the theme of incommunicability may be traced through the stories of this report - moving from the comic misunderstandings of "The Middleton Muse" to the lethal distortions of "An Incident in Pocanta." However, an analysis of these stories in terms of this motif does little to convey the real feeling or essence of incommunicability as it emerges in the stories themselves. In the words of Pierre Bohne, and of thousands of others before him, let the work speak for itself...one can only hope it communicates, meaningfully.

THE WEEK-END GUEST

"Thank God, she's gone - I hope it's for longer than eight months this time."

"George, you know I had no idea she'd take my letter as a serious invitation. And it wasn't so bad, was it - just three days?"

As they spoke, they were both smiling and waving to a wan, chicly painted face behind one of the windows of a forward car.

"Bad enough. Let's go home."

"We can at least wait 'til she leaves. There - "

The train hissed and rumbled and began to pull away from the platform. They smiled and waved until the face was gone.

"Well - you certainly were awfully well-behaved all week-end."

They turned to walk down the ramp back into the station. He took her arm by the elbow.

"Look Susan. I feel sorry for Margaret. I even like her. So don't treat me like a six year old kid who acted nice in front of company. I just don't want her back - that's all."

He pushed open the doors and they stepped off the ramp and into the central waiting room. They kept walking.

"I think you're really angry."

"Maybe I am - Oh, I don't know. Let's just drop it."

"Well don't blame me. It was just one of those casual things anyone puts in letters. You know - 'What great fun it would be to have you with us again, if only for a week-end.' How was I to know she'd snatch at it the way she did?"

They had crossed the station and pushed through the outside doors and began walking across the parking lot.

"Because you know Margaret - or claim to. You know how she dotes on you

and anything that belongs to you - your children, your home, even me - because I'm your husband."

"Not meaning to sound cruel, George, I'd guess she's pricked the old ego again."

"Do you always have to sound like something out of one of her damned stories?"

He opened the car door and she slid in, pulled her skirt after her and opened her purse - all without looking at him. She found a cigarette and lit it while he walked around to his side and got in. He had started the motor, backed out of the slot and headed toward the street before she answered him.

"That's an old dodge, George. Try something else. Why don't you try asking yourself what really bothers you about Margaret's and my friendship?"

He turned the car into the street and moved with the traffic down the boulevard.

"There. Right there - What really bothers me - You say things like that. When the two of you get together you're always talking about the real reasons for the way people talk or act. Hell, I always feel like I'm a research specimen for one of her damned notebooks."

"Whenever we get together! This is the first time I've seen her in nearly a year. And maybe if you'd read some of her notebooks you wouldn't be so inclined to sneer. They're really wonderful."

They stopped for a red light. George shifted down and bent his head to watch the signals.

"Yeah it's a wonder they can be so full of - "

"Never mind."

"Drivel."

The light changed and the car started to move again.

"Oh, you are quick. I still don't see why you have to get so nasty about something you don't even know about."

George lightly braked the car and pulled around a long curve.

"But I do know. I read some of them - almost all of them - while you and she played bridge over at Carol's."

"You did not! George, you couldn't have."

The road straightened and the car righted itself.

"Yeah, I could have and I did."

"I don't believe you." She stubbed out her cigarette in the ashtray.

"No? Well, let's see. Oh sure - the poor slob comes back from the Big War to find out his wife has been sleeping around with everybody but the village idiot. So what does he do? He makes a pot of coffee and they sit down together like he's never been gone. Like this is their second cup together before he has to catch the 9:05. All is forgiven. The end. Geez!"

"So what's so wrong about - "

The car lurched to a stop for another signal.

"That's just not the way people are, that's all. What's the matter? Don't you and your arty friend think things happen anymore? In every damned thing of hers I read nothing happened, nobody felt anything - not what they'd really feel."

A car horn sounded behind them. George threw the car into gear and jammed his foot on the accelerator. Their heads jerked back as the car jumped forward.

"Well, you don't have to drive like a maniac just because you're mad about Margaret! Nobody asked you to read her notebooks, you know." She lit another cigarette.

"That's right. Nobody did. Do we need anything from the store?"

"Milk and eggs maybe. Oh, and we're all out of coffee."

"Coffee! Hell, I just brought you a pound home two days ago."

"I know that - but Margaret liked to keep the pot going and - "

"Yeah, I know. The two of you sit there and down coffee and she yammers about 'Man's inhumanity to Man,' but mostly woman, to hear her tell it, while Teddy's yellin' in his crib with wet pants!"

"You're not mad at Margaret! You're mad at me. You never give me credit for anything." She started to cry.

He pulled the car to the curb in front of a small, square building that said Freeny's Market. He cut the engine, got out of the car and slammed the door. Then he bent down and looked at her through the open window.

"Anything else?"

She snapped her head around to face her own window. She was still crying.

"I'm out of cigarettes."

He straightened and walked around the back of the car and up the walk to Freeny's Market. She stopped crying. She turned the key in the ignition and turned on the radio. She fumbled with the dial, but stopped at the opening sounds of Ravel's Bolero. The snare drum and woodwinds beat the cadence over and over, then the brasses came in one after another - the volume rising and rising. George opened the door and dropped a sack of groceries between them on the seat. "That's pretty loud, Susan - better turn it down a little." He slid into place behind the wheel. She made no movement. He reached for the dial knob and turned it. The sound of the music dropped, but still sounded clearly.

"Well, that did it!" She turned it up.

"You want to wake up the whole neighborhood?" He turned it down. He turned the key in the ignition; the motor turned over and caught. The music had stopped.

"You're the most inconsiderate man I've ever seen!"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. I'm inconsiderate, and I'm mean...and what's your

favorite? Oh yeah...I'm insensitive." He said this with his head turned away from her. He was looking backward out his window down the street. The car pulled away from the curb.

"Go on - make fun. I don't care. But you are, you know. You're emotionally sub-human."

"That's my nice, big girl - start name-calling. Geez!"

He braked the car and squalled it to the right around the corner.

"Call me immature when you drive like a hot-headed adolescent!"

He spun the wheel, turned the car to the left and rocked it to a stop in the drive-way. Susan said, "I'm going to bed." They both opened their doors. She slammed hers shut and stalked across the yard and up the steps to the front porch. She tapped gently on the door. It opened and a short, round woman with graying hair peered out through the screen. Susan smiled.

"It's just us, Mrs. Palmer. George is bringing in some groceries. Thank you for watching Teddy for us - did he stay asleep?"

"Oh that dear little baby - he's so good. Not a bit of trouble. Call me anytime for him. Being so handy right next door and all - "

"Thank you, Mrs. Palmer."

"Well I'd better get over home. Your Theatre of Dreams is going to start in a minute and I never miss it."

Susan's smile broadened, but she said nothing.

"Do you and George watch it, Susan?"

"No. No, I don't. I always watch Gallery Six at that time."

"Oh. That's the one that shows famous pictures or parts of plays and poems and things, isn't it?"

"Yes, that's the one. They're doing a comparative study of T. S. Eliot's poetry and Byzantine culture tonight. I wouldn't want to miss that!"

"Well, I'd better run along like I said. Good-night, Susan." The woman raised her voice: "Good-night, George."

He walked from the kitchen into the living room, folding the brown grocery sack as he came.

"Good-night, Mrs. Palmer. It was sure nice of you to take the time to mind Teddy. He'd never gone to bed if he'd known you were coming over."

"Well, I love him too. Good-night now."

"Here. I'll walk you over home."

"Good-night." Mrs. Palmer's and Susan's voices sounded the word together.

Susan shut the door and locked it. She walked over to the television set and turned it on. While she waited for the picture to come in, she removed her shoes, then her hat. She walked back to the door and unlocked it.

"This - is Gallery Six." The deep male voice faded into a low roll of drums. A flute piped high against them. "In a moment, our distinguished panel will gather to discuss the influence d'esprit of Art Nouveau as reflected in the poetry of Ezra Pound. But first..."

Susan switched the channel selector from twelve to ten.

"...tonight's story, an adaptation of Daphne DuMaurier's classic, Rebecca. But first..."

Susan walked to the door, drew back the valance and looked out. The car shone dully in the moonlight. She went to the phone in the kitchen.

"Hello, Mrs. Palmer? This is Susan. Is George there? Thank you."

"Where are you...Oh...But the Theatre's an hour program...Oh...Well, I'm going to bed. I am going to watch Gallery Six. But I'm going to bed right after it's over...yes, it's unlocked. Did you think to get me any cigarettes like I...Oh...Goodbye."

She hung up the phone, took the new pack of cigarettes out of the cabinet and walked back to the living room. She stopped at the desk. From the drawer,

she took a large pad of paper and a pencil. A sprawling, gothic mansion loomed on the T-V screen, and a woman's voice said,

"Last night I dreamt again of Manderlay..."

Susan turned up the volume, walked to the chair opposite the set and sat down. She began to write.

Dear Margaret,

I know you'll be shocked to get a letter from me so soon, but I've got something too good to keep. Right now I'm watching Gallery Six. It's a shame you're on the train and missing it - Art Nouveau and Pound tonight. I certainly agree with you - their things are always perceptive and well done. So if this is a bit disjointed, I know you'll understand.

What I really want to write is what happened right after you left. I think it's a perfect story idea for you. Oh, not the way it is, of course - you'll have to rework it to give it any really deep, human significance. All I'm supplying is the germ. (Isn't that what you said James called it?) But one word before I go on. Please don't be offended by anything here - you know how George is - men are -

The T-V voice said, "There was a little cottage on the beach we would not go near on our frequent walks..."

Susan continued to write. The hands on the desk clock moved through ninety minutes.

"...So be sure to join us next week for Your Theatre of Dreams!" Susan quickly laid aside the pad and pencil and rose from her chair. She crossed to the television and turned it off. There was the sound of foot-steps on the front porch. She sat down again and began to write. The door opened. It was George.

"Hi, honey."

"Hello."

"Say, you missed a good one tonight. Just the kind women love - romance and chills - the works."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Rebecca by Daphne somebody. You'd probably know her name."

"Du Maurier. I know the story. She writes very slick, saleable things."

"Oh. Well. It was pretty good anyhow. Mrs. Palmer sure got a kick watching it."

"I'm sure she would."

"Still got a pout on, huh? Well, you don't have to get smart about Mrs. Palmer."

"Now what did I say? I just said I was sure she would enjoy that type of thing."

"She's a real sweet old lady. And she's lonely. If you're so damned sensitive you might try being a little friendlier. Instead of just using her for a baby-sitter all the time."

"You should talk. And what about that crack you made about it being so nice of her 'to take the time.' When God knows that's all she's got is time since her husband died. I was so embarrassed!"

"Well I went over and sat with her, didn't I? What's more I enjoyed it. She even fixed a pot of tea."

"How nice. And just what do you know about how friendly I am? She's over here every day playing with Teddy. And for your information, I only put up with it because I know how lonely she is!"

"Do you have any idea of how you sound? - Oh skip it. I thought you were going to bed."

"I am - as soon as I finish this."

"What is it?"

"Just something I'm writing."

"How was Gallery Six?"

"Fine."

"Well, I'm going to bed."

"Good-night."

The clock on the desk pointed to one. She tore the written sheets from the pad and folded them. Then she placed them under all the sheets on the pad next to the back cardboard cover. She turned off the light and felt her way to the bedroom. When she reached the door, she flicked on the overhead light for a moment while she switched on one of the lamps on the dressing table. George turned and coughed lightly - still asleep. When she was ready, she turned off the light, felt her way to the bed, and slipped in beside him.

"George." She pressed his arm. "George." He stirred.

"What is it?"

"I'm sorry we quarreled."

"Oh. I am, too."

"Kiss me good-night?"

George got himself to one elbow and leaned over her. He kissed her lightly on the cheek.

"Good-night George." She turned on her side away from him.

"Good-night."

He lay awake. He pushed the pillow off on the floor; he picked the pillow up again. He turned from his back to his side. The luminous dial of the clock on the dresser showed two-thirty. There was only the sound of her deep, even breathing. He got out of bed. He felt his way into the hall and pulled the bedroom door silently shut. Then he switched on the hall light. He walked to the desk and turned on the lamp there. He then went to the kitchen and poured

himself a glass of milk. On an end-table lay the latest Time. He picked it up and sat down in the chair where she had sat earlier. Her pad and pencil were on the table, also a pack of cigarettes - unopened. He picked up the pad to make room for his glass. Some thickly folded sheets slipped from the pad to the floor. He picked them up and opened them. He began to read.

"...please don't be offended by anything here - you know how George is - men are..."

He slowly read through several more pages.

"...then he comes home and we have at it again. And do you know what his big point was? That that "sweet old lady" (he meant Mrs. Palmer - you know, that wretchedly lonely woman next door) had fixed him a pot of tea! I only bear his children, keep his home, and still try to keep intellectually alive, but what do I get?

He read through, and turned more pages.

...so I said "Good-night" - but he just stalks off to bed. Isn't that perfect? Can't you just see it? Of course, you'll want to give it much more. There's obviously not much here to work with as it actually happened. I thought about perhaps haveing the poor, ignorant baby-sitter (somehow!) accidentally discover a journal George keeps! And giving it to me when I get home. Isn't that a twist? Aren't the possibilities just tremendous? You see he could be either super-sensitive or even much more of a dolt than his wife suspected. Either way, my mind just whirls at the climax you could build. But I leave that to you -, you're the writer. I am just the happy wife and mother-type. Which reminds me - Teddy will be too much with us more soon than late. So I'll close for now. Let me know what you do with this.

Love,

Suzie

He refolded the sheets. He rose stiffly from the chair and walked to the kitchen. He dropped the sheets into the wastebasket. He stood staring down at them and at last picked them up again. He walked back into the living room and sat down at the desk. He opened the pages to the last sheet. He took up a pencil and printed deliberately under the last of Susan's writing the letters P.S. He stared at the letters he'd made, then carefully erased them. He sat with the sheets folded in his hand. The hands of the clock pointed to four.

"The hell," he said aloud. "What the hell can I do?"

A VISITOR FOR TEA

He heard the creak on the stairs and know she was coming; knew, with his eyes closed, that even now his aunt stood just beyond the door. She came to him every night this way, and every night he pretended sleep. Only after she was gone was he free to go into that dark and secret place. Conrad had dreamed only twice that he remembered, and in both dreams he thought he was with his mother. But when he awoke, all that lingered was the sound of someone laughing - perhaps her, but he was not sure. So he did not dream. To be sure he would not, he pressed each finger of his right hand into the palm of his left, then each finger of his left hand into the palm of his right. Next he slowly bit down on his tongue and counted to seventeen, while with each number he shut his eyes tighter. He was then surely saved from dreaming, but for one thing: if he opened his eyes again, he must repeat the whole charm. He could not remember a night he had repeated his charm fewer than four times. And he could never begin until after his aunt had, each night, silently pushed open the door, peered at him over her candle, and drawn the door shut again. He waited for its soft, wonderful click to tell him he had fooled her.

He humped himself under the quilt and pulled it high about his chin. She must think him asleep; then she could not scold him in that scraping whisper of hers: All good boys are asleep by now. Good boys don't try to fool their poor old aunties. Good boys...good boys...good boys. Conrad twisted his face and mocked the words into his pillow.

He heard the knob turn and the darkness behind his closed eyes became a reddish black - she had pushed the candle in. Go away. Go away. He prayed it with his whole body. But the redness became brighter, and he thought he could feel the warmth of the candle close to his cheek. Then he felt her hard fingers plucking at his shoulder.

"Wake up! You don't fool me. Wake up!" She shook him by the shoulder and jerked the quilt down. He felt himself shiver.

"Yes, aunt?" He was sitting up now and forced his eyes open to look at her. Her face hung loose and shadowed over the candle.

"Listen to me!" He fastened his eyes on the safety pin at her throat that kept the heavy gray gown together. He could see the little loose threads where the buttons had been.

"Listen to me, I said!" She was shaking him harder. "And look at me when I speak to you." He gazed full into her face - it was more crazily colored and patterned than the quilt that lay in broken, disordered mounds around him.

"Yes, aunt?" he said again, without really knowing why he spoke at all.

" 'Yes aunt, yes aunt'...that all you can say? Now you listen to me. Yer mother be coming tomorrow...night-post just brung her letter." She stopped; she waited. "Well? You still got nothing to say?"

"No, aunt." He felt, without being able to name it, the folly of his words as he spoke them. He was not surprised when she struck him on the mouth. He licked his lip and seemed to taste blood, not with his tongue, but deep in his throat.

"She that's not bothered about you for three years...three years, that's how long I've fetched and done for you, my Con...and what do I get? 'Yes aunt' and 'no aunt' but never a thanks from your smart mouth...No, never thanks!" Conrad thought she would strike him again. He was surprised when instead she placed the candle on the table and sat down beside him on the bed. She began to rock back and forth, at once weeping and moaning.

"Three years, mind you. Then she pops in on me tomorrow. Just pops in and catches me in a mess, she thinks. But we'll show her!"

Conrad felt himself suddenly caught and gathered close to her, his breath

smothered in the coarse texture and foul odor of the gown. Before his head might be drawn to touch her body beneath the fabric, he jerked himself upright.

"Where has she been?" He had asked this question often, and always before his aunt had answered "Away" or "Boarding with the Devil," and he had not known what she meant. But tonight seemed already full of change - or the promise of change. He hoped his aunt might finally answer his question that his mother had been away in London, or America, or even India. India would be best. She might have seen a real tiger; a black man with a great jewel growing out of his forehead; an elephant with...

"She's not been over a three-day journey from us ever." Conrad pressed smooth some of the mounds in the quilt with his hand. He pressed them and pressed them and did not look again at his aunt.

"Well? Don't that even get a rise out of you? She could've come any time, but she didn't. She could've sent a bit of money from time to time but - Stop fiddling with that quilt and look at me!"

Conrad let his hands fall idle where they were and turned his face to his aunt. The dim light dug two small, dark graves where her eyes would be. He looked again at the pin.

"Don't like to look at me, do you?...No, you're just like your mother, you are. I can see you smirking at me behind that fine, smooth face of yours. Just the way she used to do..."

Her voice went on, but Conrad had stopped his ears inside: he heard her without listening; he watched her without seeing. It was a trick he'd learned so long ago it seemed he'd always known how. At her first word of how bad he was, how bad his mother was, how bad everyone in the world was, he could begin counting on his fingers. Without moving them, but feeling each in its turn grow heavier inside, he could count over and over and over how many hours it

was before he could go to bed. Sometimes she would slap him hard on the side of the head and scream, "I won't let you look at me like that!" Then she would make high, crying sounds, but he never saw any tears. She would rush away from him then and he would feel the anger build higher and higher within him until it broke hot and full through all his body. It was not the slap, but her whining that made him rage. But he would not cry. He had learned that if he crossed his toes very hard - now over, now under, now over - he would not cry.

This time she did not slap him, though. She had entwined the fingers of one hand in his hair, and with the fingers of the other she grasped his chin. She pulled, not hard enough to hurt, but strongly, slowly, his face so close to hers that her thick, bad-sweet breath blew over him. Feeling it upon his eyes and cheeks and lips was more terrible to him than the smell of it in his nose.

"She's beautiful, you know. You know how beautiful she is, don't you?" Conrad did not know. He could not really remember his mother.

"Then she's happy, ain't she, aunt?" His aunt let go of him so suddenly he nearly fell back upon the bed. She turned from him and sat straight and rigid.

"Happiness ain't for this world. She's got herself jewels and satin dresses. She's got herself another man. She's beautiful." She wheeled down upon him and leaned over him until he felt his head sink deep into the pillow. "But she ain't happy!" The blue and yellow patches of her face twitched in the candle-light.

Conrad had been caught by the word man. His aunt had seemed to push her whole voice into it.

"The man. The man she's gotten herself...will he be my father, aunt?"

His aunt threw back her head and began to laugh. The pin at her throat seemed to stretch against the straining fabric. She laughed in a way that

sounded like she was sneezing very fast.

"Yer father! Yer father? God knows who be yer father, Conrad." She stood up, hugging herself and dancing around in a little circle. She laughed harder, as if she had said something very funny.

Conrad tried to think about what his aunt had said. If he didn't know who his father was, then it was true that no one else would know either. No one except God, like his aunt said. God was the one who had to remember the things everyone else had forgotten. That's why He was. God could probably remember his mother, too.

His aunt had sat down again. He saw she tried to stop laughing. She sucked her fist, then smoothed her hair, then sucked her fist again. Her laughter now was only in little gusts of breath.

"You was a low start for her, Conrad...but she's come up since you. You was four, maybe, when she left. But she's come up a long way to her satins and jewels. But such a ladder she's clumb. The ladder of sin..."

His aunt's voice had grown softer. There was no laughing in it or her face now. Her voice stopped. Conrad could hear his finger tracing the wrinkles in the sheet under him. The promise of change seemed dark and full and all around him now.

"Why did you get me up, aunt?"

"Right snippy, ain't you? If I want you up, I'll get you. And without yer questions neither!" Conrad waited for the blow he was sure she would give him. It did not come.

"Now when yer mother comes tomorrow, don't you spoil her visit by all yer complainin'...do you hear? You just tell her how very nice things alus are between me 'nd you and how much you love your aunt."

She took a long time on each of the last three words, and stroked Conrad's

hand three times as she spoke them. Love your aunt. Conrad said them different ways in his mind, and even sang them silently to a funny little tune. Soon they sounded strange and not like words at all. His aunt was no longer stroking his hand. Her fingers were now coiled about his, pressing his hand against each other.

"You hear me, Conrad?" She pressed again and his fingers hurt.

"Yes, aunt. I'll love you tomorrow." He jerked his hand free.

"See that you do... 'nd a lot." She rose now and took up her candle. She began to walk away, but turned and came back to the bed. She bent over him, the candle bright and hot in his face.

"We want mother to be pleased with us, don't we, Connie?"

He saw her hand rise and he twisted his head away. Her hand fell lightly on the pillow beside him and he saw she was patting it gently.

"Yes, aunt. We want to please her."

He thought his aunt smiled. But she moved quickly from beside the bed and the light moved away with her. She stopped once more at the door.

"Be a good boy now and go to sleep. Have pleasant dreams. Dream all about how nice you'll be for yer aunt tomorrow."

The door clicked shut. Conrad wondered what difference it could make if his mother wasn't pleased with them. He groped for the quilt and once more drew it over himself. He thought of his aunt's last words to him and was frightened. He pressed the little finger of his right hand into the palm of his left so hard he could feel the prick of his bitten nail.

Conrad knew he had not been asleep. He was working his charm for the seventh time when he first heard her talking downstairs. He tried to make out the words his aunt was saying, but they were muffled and lost in little rattling noises - noises like the soft clink of dishes against each other. Conrad thought

how changed tonight was - so terribly changed he even wanted to get out of his bed. He stretched his hands in front of him and felt the table. Then the chair...the wall. He knew there was nothing else to get in his way. He got to the door and opened it, hoping it would not creak. There was light at the bottom of the stairs. Conrad guessed it was coming from the kitchen.

"Have some tea, sister dear."

It was his aunt's voice, and Conrad was suddenly afraid he had been asleep for a long time. His mother was already here. But that was wrong...his aunt would have called him. She'd want the kitchen things scrubbed and the floor swept before his mother came. And he would have been waked, surely, to tell his mother how much he loved his aunt. It was still dark - it was night. His mother must have popped in on them early: to catch them in a mess.

"Thank you, sister. You look well, too." His aunt had answered another voice Conrad could not hear. Conrad decided his mother must talk with her hands the way the pretty girl at the market did: because her throat was closed up with evil words. That's what his aunt said. Conrad wanted to see if his mother could talk as well with her hands as the market girl did. Perhaps his mother was even prettier. His aunt had said she was beautiful. He crept down the steps, and sat hunched on the bottom one. If he bent his head just right, he could see around the corner into the kitchen, but knew he could not be seen.

His aunt was sitting at the table.

"More tea?"

She took the tea-pot in one hand and a cup and a saucer in the other. Her hands were shaking so much, Conrad was sure she would drop the dishes. The cup rattled more violently on the saucer. His aunt let them slide out of her hands and on to the table. She sprawled her arms upon the table and let her head fall upon them. One of her hands tipped over the tea-pot and water spilled out of it

and made a little silvery pool. It began to drip, drip, drip on the floor, but his aunt did not look up. She hadn't been talking to anyone and she wasn't even drinking tea. Conrad felt she must be head-sick like she's said mean people get to pay for their sins. His aunt wagged her head back and forth upon her arms, and she began to talk again. Her voice was as Conrad had never heard it before.

"Tomorrow'll be the same. She'll look at me and I'll shake and I'll spill it then, too."

He knew she was really crying. Then he felt himself jump as his aunt leaped up from the table and rubbed her hands over her face. Conrad wondered how she could stand to touch it.

"You burned me, God!...When she was always the bad one, you burned me!"

He could see the tears shining against the red and blue patches and running down the little ruts of her cheeks. Conrad knew he had seen something terrible and secret, and he went as quickly and as softly back up the stairs as he could. He struck his foot hard on the chair as he pushed through his dark room, but he could not think how it ached until he'd gotten safely into his bed. And that was all he tried to think of then...how much his foot hurt. He tried to crowd out the awful thing he'd seen in the kitchen. He crossed his toes, uncrossed them, crossed them again. The tears stood hot and ready to spill in his eyes. It's my foot...it's my foot...my foot hurts. This is what he said, but he saw before him the face of his aunt with tears. Conrad cried until he slept. He did not dream.

He had sat on the old green stool across from his mother. They sat that way for a long time, and Conrad felt his hands growing cold. He started to bite his finger nail. But then she had smiled and reached out her hand to him; and as he put his hand in hers, she drew him to her so that he stood beside her chair.

"You know who I am?" She put her hand up to his face but did not touch it.

"Yes. You're my mother." He watched her hand fall back to her lap.

"That's right. And do you love your mother?" The question stung him. His aunt had not told him what to say. He looked at her, but she was staring at his mother and did not seem to see him at all. So he said,

"I don't know. I love aunt."

"Well, maybe we can fix all that. Here - give us a little kiss, sweetheart." And she turned her cheek to him. It looked like white paper pierced through and through with thousands of tiny holes. At the very center of the whiteness there was a ragged circle of pink. Even within it he could see the holes. And she smelled sweet - with a wonderful sweetness his aunt had never had. He pressed his lips to the pink circle, but her skin was smooth and cold, and hard against his mouth.

"That's a good boy. Now whyn't you go and sit down again, sweetie?"

He stepped back to the stool. His mouth felt oddly bruised, as though his aunt had struck him. When he sat down, he saw his mother take a handkerchief from her sleeve and wipe her cheek.

She had asked him more things then and he had answered. And to each answer he was careful to add, "And I love aunt very much." Once she had said, "What do you play at school?" And he had said, "I don't play anything very much. But I do love my aunt." Where she had only smiled before, his mother now laughed out loud. She laughed hard and drew her coat closer about her. Conrad tried to laugh too, but he saw his aunt look at him and he knew he'd somehow done the wrong thing again. So he stopped the laugh before it made any sound. He didn't talk much more. The two women talked as if he weren't there at all, but upstairs or at school.

"Kind of skinny, ain't he?"

"And just what do you think I got to pay for food with? He's all right."

"Don't look too chipper to me. Is he alus that quiet? Seems to me a boy should laugh a little."

"Oh we laugh. We laugh all the time. We laugh every y twice a day how funny it is he's got no mommer or popper."

"Oh shut that. Yer lookin' about the same." Conrad saw his mother smile very slow and long at his aunt. His aunt started to raise her hand, but she dropped it back and curled her fingers around the arm of her chair until they had white spots over the knuckles.

"I'd offer you some tea, sister, but I got none."

Conrad wondered why his aunt lied and remembered the terrible thing he'd seen in the kitchen last night. His heart seemed suddenly to beat in his ears.

"It don't matter. I'm not much of a tea-toteler anyway." His mother was laughing again. Conrad felt his heart slide back down where it belonged. She might be beautiful, but she is not as pretty as the market-girl. Her mouth was a gorgeous bright-wet red, but it was pulled up in a funny way in one corner - even when she talked. He looked for jewels but could see none - her hands and her arms were bare. Then he wondered if her dress were satin. He was not sure if he would know satin if he saw it, but he wanted to see her dress. As he was thinking this, his mother stood up just as if she could hear his thoughts. She opened the coat but shut it again in an instant.

"There's'a little something we got to talk about, you see." And Conrad forgot about the satin of her dress. He had thought when she called him skinny how thin her own arms and face were. So her great, round stomach surprised him. It seemed to surprise his aunt, too.

"Go upstairs, Conrad, and don't come down 'til I says you can."

Conrad went upstairs to his room and lay down upon his bed. He had not been able even to look at his mother when he left the room. He was sure she would be laughing at him for whatever he had done that was so bad he had to be sent off. He began to trace the pattern in the quilt with his finger. He listened to their talk, but it meant nothing to him. Now that he was gone his name was not even mentioned.

"So that's what brought you 'round. I should've guessed it warn't 'cause yer heart was bleedin' to see us!"

"Will you take it?"

"Take it? You're the great taker in the family, ain't you? Oh no. No, you don't. You don't saddle me with any more of your bastards!"

There was a long silence. Conrad had traced nearly half the quilt before he could make out what the voices were saying again.

"Give us a spot of somethin', dearie."

"Like I said. I got no tea. And I don't stock nothing else. I ain't one of your godless and fancy friends, you know."

"And like I said. Shut that kind of stuff with me." Conrad stopped tracing the design of the quilt. The voices were loud and harsh. He went to the door to listen. But even there he could not distinguish words in the murmers they now exchanged. He went back to his bed and began picking at a crusted stain he found right in the middle of his quilt. But the voices rose again and he rushed back to the door.

"If you don't, I'll ditch it somewheres."

"You would. Your kind don't care none at all about what they fetch, do they?"

"That's why we got good, sweet sisters like you...that cares so much they turns us out!"

"It's your sin...your sin!"

"Goodness must come easy with a face like that!"

There were muffled, jumbled noises. The voices shouted and screamed but Conrad could not understand the words. Then lower but still loud, he recognized his aunt's.

"Get out! Get out!" Conrad had crept nearer and nearer down the stairs. "Get out!" At the crash of the door he lurched upright and into the room. His aunt was leaning with her back against the door.

"Aunt?"

She spun away from him and covered her face with her hands.

"Did she get out, aunt?"

"Yes, yes - can't you see?"

"Will she come back?"

"No. Get upstairs like I told you."

Conrad went back up the stairs and into his room. He waited a long time for the kitchen sounds of supper being fixed, but there were none. At last he undressed and got into bed. The chair disappeared in the dark. The gray square of his window was swallowed by the night. Still he did not hear her step on the stair. He sat up and fought to keep his eyes open. Then at last he heard her.

He had barely enough time to lie down and pretend sleep. The door opened and the dim redness told him she stood there with her candle.

"I've something to tell you. Now don't go and whine and moan about it. It won't be just you and auntie no more." He had not even shown he was awake.

"Just take it like a good big boy. God sends us many burdens. I'm taking in a baby."

Conrad lay still. He was trying to think of what he should say. The news made him glad, so glad he was afraid to stir or the gladness might go away.

"Yer not sleeping, you brat. Well the new one won't do me like you have."

I've seen to that."

Conrad opened his eyes, and what he saw startled him more than his aunt's terrible face ever had. She wore the same gray gown and carried the candle. But against the blackness of the hall she seemed to have no head. Then her breath made it flutter slightly - the veil, the black thing, she had draped over her head.

He heard himself shriek, "Aunt Grace!"

But she was gone and the door clicked shut. He forgot even his charm, and lay staring with wide eyes into the dark.

THE LAST, SWEET SOUNDS OF MAY

He wondered what Mankowitz would say. He watched the rain hit the pane, hold for an instant as a drop, then tremble, break, and stream down the glass. Through his tightly locked window, through the still, cold, odorless air of their air-conditioning - through all they had devised to keep it from him, or him from it - it was there with him now: the deep, sweet smell of spring. He felt the urgency quicken and rise in him again. He knew what Mankowitz would say. "...springtime, Mr. Miller...certain associations..." He pressed his hand against the window. Through the glass, the rain pulsed against his flesh. He walked quickly to the door and opened it. He looked both directions, pulled the door soundlessly shut behind him, and stepped into the empty, gray corridor.

The rain fell softly on him and came through his clothes and ran upon his skin. His body ached as its warmth and sweetness pierced him. But the rain stopped.

There were too many streets to choose from, so he would wait - one of them would beckon. All of them blinked gaudy color at him that seemed to magnify and vibrate in the graying mist. He looked down. Imprisoned beneath the dark, flowing water of the gutter was a brilliant, shimmering redness - of a single shape that broke and re-formed itself a thousand times each moment...

"Look, Mama, look! You want to see what's happened? It's my flower. See Mama, see? It's broke its pot - its roots have broke right through the pot. Isn't it beautiful, Mama?"

"Not like that. We will transplant it...We will plant it again in the window-box."

"No, Mama, no!"

"Hush Jimmy."

"It's wrong - You shouldn't plant it again! It's my flower."

"Be still, Jimmy. You brought it home to me. You're just acting silly."

"Oh Mama, don't do that to it. Please don't do that!"

"Jimmy! Stop it! Jimmy!"

The crimson petals were warm and wet as he crushed them and ripped them.

The redness in the gutter exploded under the shock of rain drops. They fell hard and cold and beat down fiercely upon him. He looked up at the red sign. It said Bennie's. He pushed through the blackened glass doors.

A green neon arrow pointed down into a square that was even blacker than the small room where he stood. The palm of his hand was still pressed back against the door. As he watched, the arrow seemed to blur, then intensify, then blur again. He pressed his hand against the door so that it opened slightly. He waited for the street sounds of car horns and footsteps and running motors to float in to him, but the only sound was the pounding of the rain against the door. He relaxed his hand and the door shut; the arrow blurred and pointed in the silence.

"Right down those stairs, Mister. Just follow the arrow. You get your ticket down there."

And as if the voice itself had emitted light, he became aware that the room was not dark. The man was behind the desk like the one at the hospital. He erased the words. The man was behind a desk like those in hotel lobbies. But this one was smaller - more like a cage - half of a cage without bars. The man was leaning on the desk with both arms. Smoke from a cigarette that hung down from his mouth circled and writhed in front of his face. He had his eyes half shut and his head tilted back a little as if this were all he could do to escape the smoke. The man seemed to reflect his own great weariness.

There was a lamp on the desk and the man reached to it with one hand and pulled the chain. There was another sliding click as he pulled again.

"You see? It's out. Gotten a bulb if I'd thought we do business. But the storm...I didn't figure." The smoke wavered in front of his face. He tilted his head back a little more. But the cigarette had hardly moved while he talked, and when he stopped it was as if he had said something very final... very important. Miller decided the man's weariness was even greater than his own, or he could not stay like this, alone with the arrow in the dark.

"Look, buddy, if you want a ticket you have to go down those stairs."

The man backed away from the front of the desk and out of the greenish glow. Where his face had been there was only the smoke. Where the face must be now, there was the red tip of the cigarette. It glowed very brightly now, and something in the man's voice had changed. It had the edge of fear. He must have felt the arrow too.

Miller turned away from him and walked toward the black square. As he passed the arrow, he reached up to touch it. He vaguely hoped it would be hot, but the tubing of the arrow was oddly cool under his hand. He pushed with the ball of his foot over the edge of each step and followed the vertical down with his heel to the next. There was a diluted yellow glare at the bottom of the stairs...and there was another man...he was in a cage.

"How many, mister?"

Miller looked at him. His skin was white even under the glare of the yellow bulb that hung above him.

"How many?" Miller heard himself repeat the words. The man was unwinding a roll of red tickets. His fingers were shaking.

"Yeah...How many hours you want to swim?"

Miller stepped nearer the cage and curled his fingers around the bars.

"What time is it?"

The man looked up somewhere above his head at something Miller could not see.

"Nine-thirty."

"I mean what day...what's the date today?"

"It's the thirty-first. Gee buddy, where you been? Yesterday was Memorial Day. Have a long week-end or something?"

The man stretched his lips back and exposed his twisted, dark-stained, teeth. A beast - but in a cage, so Miller could get away. He turned from him and looked down the narrow corridor. It ended in a turnstile that looked bent and ugly against the great yellow glow that shimmered and beckoned beyond it. Miller began to walk toward it.

"Hey...hey mister! Where you going?" Miller didn't answer. He began to run. He only wanted to see. "You can't get through...I got the control in here."

Miller stopped at the turn-stile and stared into the huge room. It was deserted, and everything was green! Even the walls with their painted, chipping palm trees - half hidden by green wooden benches. The green-glass surface of the water held large circles of light that stared vacantly back at the bare, round lamps in the ceiling. The air was hazy with steam.

"Hey!" He heard the man again and tried to run back to the voice. But his feet were rooted. He had to pull each one and place it to take a step. Somehow he got back to the voice and clung to the bars.

"Why didn't he tell me?" Miller said. Then he saw the man open his mouth and work his lips, but no sound came.

"Why didn't he tell me what was down here?" Miller tried to reach through the bars to touch the man.

"Eddie...come down quick. Hell, I don't know...Just get down here!"

Miller saw the man was talking into a black square on the wall...to Eddie. This man must be Bennie. Their names sounded like brothers. Miller wanted to talk to Eddie. He withdrew his hand from the cage, and turned his head to watch the stairs. He saw the glow of the cigarette first.

"What's going on here?" He seemed to be talking to the man in the cage but he was holding Miller tightly by the arm.

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"SEE? He tried to get in without a ticket 'nd then he starts in with stuff like that. He must be stewed."

"Yeah...well, he'll come upstairs nice and quiet like, won't you?" Eddie's face was so close to his that Miller thought he could taste the smoke. He felt his throat tighten with nausea.

"You should have told me. They'll be looking for me..."

"That's right, they will. So you better just run on home to the wife and kiddies like a good joe."

"Just get him outa here, Eddie, he gives me the creeps."

The man called Eddie pulled on Miller's arm. The man in the cage was winding the tickets into a tight roll, unwinding them, and pulling them even tighter. Then he felt Eddie guide him strongly and surely back up the stairs through the dim, green dark. There was the arrow...they were passing it now. Miller wanted to reach up and touch it again, but Eddie was holding his arm tight to his side. For a moment, Eddie seemed to wear the face of Mankowitz.

"I just wanted to look - I didn't do anything..."

"Yeah, I know, I know. Now you go on, and don't come back. We don't permit no drunks."

The black glass doors swung silently shut between Eddie's voice and Miller.

He was on the street again, but now there was only one way to choose: the way that had no lights. Miller began to walk. The rain was over.

"Good evening, nurse."

"Mr. Miller!"

"I didn't mean to...I mean I know you've been looking for me."

"Oh, we knew you would come back."

"Yes." He saw her waving her hands at something behind him. "What time is it? I mean what time of night is it?"

"Why it's five minutes after mid-night."

Someone was holding his arm again. They were going up more stairs.

"Did you know it's June already? It's almost summer, isn't it?"

"That's right, Mister Miller. That's right. I'll stay with you 'til doc, I mean Doctor Mankowitz can see you in the morning."

AN INCIDENT IN POCANTA

As a girl I read a great deal and hungrily about God, the great saints, and the miseries of the world; and eventually I came to flatter myself that most people were neither as well off nor as good as I. Of the last part of my maxim, I was fiercely proud. But fleet, dim shadows were cast on it by the first. I wondered with the keenest anxiety if my goodness did not depend entirely on my well-being.

Thus when Everett Johnson came into my life and at length professed to have fallen in love with me, I saw in him the perfect means to dispel forever my anxiety, to prove my goodness to be a thing in itself. I might marry this fine man of God (as I called him then) and go zealously with him wherever his duty might call. Ah - how I would shine forth; with what fervor I would apply myself to the salvation of his flock!

My family was careful to remind me I had been brought up in the Episcopal church. He was a Methodist. "What matter," I cried. "We are both Christians!" It was only much later that I learned that neither of us was.

However, we did marry and his first call was to minister to Pocanta. But the miserable creatures who had needed me so desperately in my visions were nowhere to be found. There were only people: deep, enigmatic, inscrutable people. Among them, of course, were the lonely and improverished, but always, all of them seemed sufficient unto themselves. What they called Sin, I openly and heartily scoffed at as petty and undeserving of their remorse. What I called sin, they shunned and refused to understand. I can feel yet the sting of my humiliation as in their circle meetings they would watch me and listen to me - with veiled eyes. I was not one of them nor could ever be. Quite simply, I was something different and therefore bad. And what small efforts I made to remain myself met only with constant censure from my husband. From the beginning, he saw my duty to him as his wife on a far less grand scale than I. And

I at last, outwardly, resigned myself.

But my infamy was already too wide-spread. Then, the Methodist Church transferred its ministers every two years. Everett was not transferred. Reports had gone to those in authority over us: Brother Everett's wife did not cooperate with the ladies; she said strangely insulting things to them; she was not a true believer. So it was decided that the secret of his bad wife should be buried in Pocanta rather than spread far and wide among more good Methodists. The letter that came to Everett about this said something very different. I knew it was an attempt to balm the conscience of the church authority and to soothe his pride: he more than made up for what she lacked; the people of Pocanta had indeed received a blessing - in however exceptional guise. So this is how we came to be perpetually shunted off on them; how I became the cross they all must bear - with varying degrees of civility - my husband, privately, the least civil among them. We had no children. At first I would sometimes weep in the night and he would come to where I slept and damn me as shameless and lewd. Then he would be gone, but the house would be filled with the sibilant echoes of his voice in prayer. Their victory over me then was, for all their purposes, complete. I came to their meetings and they called me Sister Barbara, and I called them Sister and nodded my head and smiled. But I no longer loved them or even hated them. I felt only contempt. I suppose what I shall record here is also the story of what has since come in its place. Because I was quite literally nothing to them, I was free to observe them and sift from their gossip and their "facts" the truth of what I am about to tell - as I am free to reconstruct it now.

The flies buzzed and pinged in crazy arcs against the windows. The old women's fans moved back and forth in front of their grooved and thickly powdered faces; Reverent Johnson dabbed at the sweat that stood in beads on his. It

seemed a usual Sunday morning in August at Pocanta's First Methodist Church. But everyone, except the very youngest children, knew or sensed that with them, there, was the unusual - sitting amongst them like a dark and eerie presence. For, for the only time in the ten years since his wife's death, Frank Jacobs was in church. And with him was his daughter Ellie.

So when my husband preached his sermon that morning, every ear was sharpened, every mind was arched, ready to pounce cat-like upon his words. Sin had become suddenly real and precise: it was Sin that was festering into life in Ellie Jacob's womb. And Satan too was real: it was he who had sprung, horridly, from the loins of Frank Jacobs - Ellie's own father.

"Yea, Brethren, I cry unto you - the Devil even now weaves his black web all about you! And right at its center he sits - quietly, so quietly - just watching, just waiting..."

As they listened, I knew each could see the others wallowing in the fouled and sticky meshes of Satan. And to each there was one figure that stood distinct against all the rest: sometimes it appeared as one of the writhing damned, sometimes as Satan himself - it was Frank Jacobs.

"So seek ye the Light - the great, white blinding Light of the Lord! Yea Brethren, lay bare your hearts, your very souls before this light, and let it cast out Evil from your inmost parts. And how come you to see this Light? How come you to this Glory? By prayer: full, earnest, and constant prayer; that is the way, my friends. That is the only way to the Light. So let us pray. O Lord, O great and merciful Lord..."

Because it was always easier for them to imagine the doom of the evil, and certainly more lonely and less exciting to contemplate the way of the good, most minds were no longer filled by rapt visions. Indeed, when my husband began to preach of the great and blinding light of the Lord, almost as one I felt their

senses shift to the heat: the dead whiteness of the light that glared down on them through the windows. So when they were called to prayer, the women welcomed this opportunity to inspect the sky. They thought they were safe in this because the Reverend always prayed with his head thrown back and, thankfully for them, his eyes clenched shut as tightly as fists. They gave no thought to me in my back pew and could not know I watched them. Nor would it have mattered to them had they known.

This was to be the afternoon of their ice-cream social. Weeks of preparation had pointed toward it, and now the glazed and lifeless sky was threatening them. I was sure most of them felt already the confinement of having to resort to their alternate plan. They had, of course, given consideration to the caprices of the weather. And because they had, they believed with a certain superstitious trust that it would not dare to rain or blow - it would rain or blow only if they had not shown such foresight, had not paid this small, pagan homage. So now against the droning, meaningless voice of my husband in prayer, they rolled their eyes upward at the traitorous sky, and surely felt indignation bristle hotly against the backs of their necks. For their heads were bowed - but with the rigid hostility of the condemned, but unrepentant, about to receive the axe. It was not their long-planned social that was most importantly threatened; it was the freedom, the mobility of the out-doors they were about to be denied: the delectable freedom of the trees and fringes of lawn and circles of bush where they could gather in their small groups and speak openly of Frank Jacobs and his daughter Ellie. This was why I knew each of them could already feel the too-small, too-square church basement closing in; why each could already hear her own voice echoing with forced and bored gaiety against the cold plaster walls. For all knew their voices could not sound there the one word that burned so hideously inside them: incest.

It was only long after this particular Sunday in August that I learned how the planning of the ice-cream social and That Awful Jacobs Affair (as it came to be called) were inextricably bound up together. It had been just three days before the first joint planning session of Charity Day Circle and Faith Night Circle that Reverend Johnson had paid his annual Christian Duty call to Frank Jacobs at his farm. The interview had become so familiarly patterned for both my husband and Frank Jacobs that it no longer held any pain and not much bitterness for either of them.

"Don't you feel it is your duty as a Christian father, Brother Jacobs, to see that the children receive proper guidance in their faith? The church welcomes you to set that example by your regular attendance each Sunday, and would rejoice to have the little ones in Sunday School. There is also the memory of Sister Mildred to consider."

"I don't think Mildred would take kindly to being called 'Sister,' Mr. Johnson."

"I can't quite agree with you there, Mr. Jacobs. Why, your wife was one of our most loyal and dutiful churchwomen before, well, before..."

"Before she married me."

"Oh, and for quite a spell after, Mr. Jacobs. For quite a spell after. But I'm not here to open old wounds. We must think now of the children."

"Even if you was, Mr. Johnson - even if you was here to open old wounds as you call it, you couldn't. What Mildred tried to do for her sister, her only real sister, you understand, was right. It shames me still, without your reminding, to remember how I paid Bertha off to get out of town. I wonder how it was having her baby alone in a strange place."

"Well now, Broth...Mr. Jacobs, it's often hard to see our Christian way clearly. I'm not so sure you were wrong. After'all, it's hard telling what

kind of influence an unmarried woman and her child might have had on your little ones. Living under the same roof and all. And she'd of had to go anyway when Mildred died bearing little Jody. Yes, she'd of had to go anyway. And without even the money then. Of course, I know poor Mildred felt it was her duty to protect Bertha, but..."

"And what she saw was right, Mr. Johnson. I was wrong. I was almost as wrong, but God, I hope not quite as wrong as those vile-tongued 'sisters of your church' as you call them. What I call them I reckon would not make proper listening for a man of God. In fact, I don't have a thing to say that would be fit listening for you. The children are fine and all my affair. So if you are finished, I've got a fence..."

"Now see here, Jacobs..."

"Yes, Mr. Johnson?"

"Nothing, Mr. Jacobs. Nothing. We'll pray for you though...you can't stop us there. We'll all of us pray for all of you."

"You needn't."

"Yes. Well...but we will, we will. Good day, sir."

"Good day, Mr. Johnson."

And so it had been with but slight variation for ten years. The first few years after Mildred's death the Reverend's and Jacobs' voices had risen to a pitch that threatened violence. But now they delivered their speeches with a flatness of tone and a calmness that belied the words they spoke, and all but emptied them of their meaning.

And their dialogue had become equally familiar to the townspeople. So familiar that even the ladies of Charity and Faith circles had given up trying to embellish the exchange, or rekindle their old wrath at Jacobs' remarks about them. It wasn't at all that they accepted them as true, it was merely that

their personal vehemence and interest had been ground away by his rude estrangement from them. Thus this tenth interview three days before the joint-planning session would have caused little stir, if there had not been another, just one day later between two very different people: Ellie Jacobs and her best friend in Pocanta, Alice Meech.

Ellie had walked home from school with Alice that Thursday afternoon, as was their weekly habit. And Mrs. Meech had served them their supper early and alone, as was her weekly habit. Their giddy, girl-babble was not welcomed by Alice's father, especially at supper-time. He found coping with, or rather enduring, one sixteen-year-old girl's highly volatile state of well-being distressing enough. Against two of them he felt his food go down in undigestible lumps. At least this consideration for George Meech's comfort was the pretext the Meeches offered themselves for not having the girls at their regular dinner table.

But there was always another reason for the private suppers of Ellie and Alice. Mrs. Meech was in with the First Methodist ladies of Pocanta, but she was constantly anguished by the sense of just how barely she was in. A great part of the cause for her rather tenuous position she attributed to Alice's friendship with Ellie. The ladies still murmured now and then of how those poor Jacobs children needed a woman's hand. And though the unfortunate business of Bertha's illegitimate pregnancy and Mildred's break with the church because of it had occurred some years before the Meeches had moved to Pocanta, Mrs. Meech still felt a stinging regret that her daughter should single out the Jacobs girl for her dearest friend. It was this that stung most deeply; that Alice had prodded Ellie into their ever closer relationship...it was Alice who needed Ellie. How many times Mrs. Meech had attempted to approach Alice about her intimacy with Ellie, only to see real pain and a desperate, clinging fear

come into Alice's eyes...begging her mother not to break the one close bond she had with someone her own age. And her mother would relent and go on secretly blaming Alice for her foolishness and herself for her weakness. Her one, small, silent reproof was to not have Ellie at the family table.

This gave Mrs. Meech a secret advantage too. The two girls spoke very freely between themselves, so freely that they seemed unaware of Mrs. Meech's presence in the kitchen, within easy earshot of their conversation. Then Mrs. Meech knew with those sharp pangs of insight that pierce at odd, unprotected moments what it was she was waiting to catch in her daughter's words or voice. Sometimes, while making quite adequate small-talk with one of the ladies, the dreadful knowledge that she spied upon her daughter, and more dreadful yet, the reasons for her spying, would become crushingly stark to Mrs. Meech: she was waiting to catch in Alice's voice those first hints of awareness of her own burgeoning sexuality. And there was no delight in Mrs. Meech's anticipation, only fear.

But Mrs. Meech was always reassured to listen to Alice and discover there no signs:

"Honestly, Ellie, I just can't get interested in boys. I'd much rather read a good book or see a good movie than try to spend a whole evening with one of them. Really, boys are so childish."

"I guess that's 'cause you're so smart, Alice. No...really you are. Sometimes I think the boys I date think I'm the childish one. We'll be having so much fun and all of a sudden they get very serious talking. About what they want to be, how they get along with their folks...even about God. And I never know what to say. I just like to sit there and listen...but I know they think I'm really a dumb one. I wish I had your brains and Jeanne Turner's looks. Wasn't that a beautiful skirt and sweater she had on today?"

"Sure, if you like to see people go around in clothes three sizes too small for them. Jeanne really thinks she's got it. Well, if she does it's certainly all physical...that's all I can say."

Mrs. Meech would hear her daughter's words, but remain deaf to what she listened for. Once she had found the initials K. S. scribbled over and over in one of Alice's notebooks, but had laughed indulgently at her crush on a movie star.

Thus it was that the girls were having their usual weekly supper on this particular Thursday night. Mrs. Meech was feeling inordinately gay and secure. Mrs. Turner had called that afternoon to ask if she wouldn't serve on the decorations committee for the ice-cream social. Indeed, Mrs. Turner had actually put her in charge of the clean-up brigade. Mrs. Meech did not dare to let herself dwell on the buried slight she vaguely apprehended in "clean-up"; she much preferred to wallow in the honor of In Charge. It was to this keen personal delight in her that Alice and Ellie presented solemn faces and picky appetites. Mrs. Meech was annoyed with their silent infringement on her joy, but easily crowded this out with sharp visions of how expertly and graciously she would be In Charge. So when the girls left the table to go to Alice's room to study, she dismissed them lightly as simply in a mood. She couldn't guess that the reins of real and heightened position were about to be given her by her daughter - through Ellie.

Alice and Ellie probably tried to affect first casual chatter and then intense attention to their American history, but they failed in both fifteen minutes after they were alone. Alice was sure Ellie would speak of the trouble she had hinted at during lunch. Ellie had whispered urgently in her ear "I've got to talk to you, Alice...tonight...I've got something awful to tell you."

Alice knew Ellie was trying to think of the right words now, but Alice was consumed with her impatience. She shut her book with a thud and pushed it

away from her. Then she turned upon Ellie what she was sure was her gravest, most mature, yet most sympathetic face.

"What is it, Ellie? What did you have to tell me?"

"I can't tell you. I can't tell anybody." She began to sob. "I don't even remember much about her, but I wish my mother was here."

"Don't cry, Ellie. You can tell me whatever it is. You're my best friend." Ellie only sobbed louder.

"You won't want to be my friend."

"Ellie! Don't talk like that. Now tell me what it is." Ellie buried her head in her arms. Her voice was barely audible.

"I'm pregnant." And at the moment she spoke the words, Alice felt Ellie a stranger. In that instant the bond had been shattered, and Alice felt herself deeply, humiliatingly betrayed. It seemed to her impossible that she had ever believed herself close to Ellie; how could they have been when Ellie existed in a dark and secret place where Alice had not been admitted? Alice found no difficulty in asking Ellie all the questions that snapped into her mind, each coldly, logically in place. Her only concern was to keep the face of sympathy intact for Ellie to see.

"Who is it, Ellie?"

"Karl. Karl Sumner." Ellie's voice rushed on, "I know what you're thinking, Alice, but he's the only one. We're...well, you see, we've been in love for a long time. We want to get married. But I didn't even dare go steady. Pa wouldn't stand for it. You know how he is."

Alice had no idea how Frank Jacobs was about anything. She had said never more than hello to him, and that only rarely. But she said:

"Yes, I know. Have you told him?"

"No...I didn't have to tell him. He just knew."

"Does Karl know your dad knows yet?"

"No. Not yet. It's funny. That's the part that makes me feel cheap...not the rest of it. Having to tell Karl that Pa knows and wants us to get married right away. That's what Karl wants, too. More than anything. But I don't know if Pa believes that. Oh Alice, you don't know Karl hardly at all. But he's wonderful. All I know is I love him and he loves me."

Alice felt embarrassed by Ellie's easy use of the word love. Alice didn't know Karl - not even well enough to say hello to comfortably. But she had known countless nights when she had lain in the quiet dark, dreaming awake of Karl and of herself with him, and she had felt herself engulfed in an unnatural hotness.

"What about Karl's folks. Do they know?"

"No."

"Well, isn't your father going to tell them?"

"No."

Alice felt a small absurd hope waver inside her.

"Why not?"

"I don't know. He just keeps saying this is something between Karl and me and him."

They talked until the clock on Alice's desk showed nine-thirty. It was then time for Ellie to walk the three blocks to the square to meet her father. Frank Jacob's made a weekly trip into town on Thursday nights, the one night Pocanta's stores remained open. Ellie would meet him at twenty to ten and ride home with him in their pick-up truck. When Ellie left that night, Alice was glad to be done with the tearful professions of friendship and vows of secrecy they had had to exchange. Alice had learned her answers much earlier. She had no plan, no idea to make a plan. But there was still that tingling, ridiculous hope reeling giddily through her.

Alice undressed quietly. She had turned off all the lights but the one on her bed. She chose her most tailored pajamas and carefully put them on. Then she called to her mother. Mrs. Meech sat down on Alice's bed beside her.

"Mother, you've just got to swear you won't tell anyone, but I've got to talk to you. Do you promise not to say a word?"

"Really Alice, you should know you can trust your own mother. Now what is it?"

A few tears dropped to Alice's cheeks. She wasn't aware of their reason or source inside herself, but she was fiercely glad they were there.

"I know I can, Mama. But this is something awful...really awful, Mama. Ellie is pregnant."

Alice watched her mother's face begin to crack into an expression of shock or unbelief, and felt oddly relieved to see it regain a rigid composure of simple disgust.

"Who is the boy?"

Alice wondered at herself that she felt no hesitation to answer. She felt only the unquenchable hope bursting again within her.

"I don't know, mama. She didn't say - exactly."

"You mean there have been so many she doesn't even know which one it was?"

Mrs. Meech hardly realized she was taking for granted all the knowledge of sex in her daughter she had so dreaded discovering there. But she believed - she saw her daughter's tears - that her daughter was as one with her in feeling disgust and contempt for sex except for its inescapable necessity...which for her was Duty. She felt this communion with her daughter more and more deeply entrenched by Alice's abundant tears and distraught recital of Ellie's sin.

"No, mama...I don't think it's that. I..."

"What about Frank Jacobs? Does he know his daughter is pregnant?"

"Ellie said she didn't have to tell him. He knew."

The look of shock and disbelief that had threatened before, now broke fully in Mrs. Meech's face. As it ebbed, Alice thought she had never seen her mother look so violently alive. Hate seemed to burn yellowly in her eyes and contempt spread in her face as a stain.

That was how it began, and no one knew or thought what the end would be. The first joint-planning session of Charity and Faith circles met that following Saturday morning, two days after Ellie had made her confidences to Alice, three days after Frank Jacobs had recited to Reverend Johnson that his children were all his own affair.

Mrs. Meech was at the meeting: buoyant still at being one of those chosen to be In Charge, and now fired with the over-whelming sense of her urgent duty to make known to the ladies her dark suspicions. And the report of Frank Jacobs' evil was thus spread from mouth to mouth as some terrible and cancerous infection.

Mrs. Meech forbade Alice to see Ellie again. Alice accused her mother of betraying her secret, secretly glad her mother had not failed her by keeping her trust. But soon, both were tearfully swept to each other, caught in an eddy of Christian devotion and forgiveness. Ellie cornered Alice alone in the girl's restroom at school and demanded to hear what she already knew had happened. Alice swore, and was sure Ellie believed: Ellie listened and tried to believe that no one had been told of her pregnancy. Then Alice told Ellie, quite simply, easily, that what she had done went against all she had been taught...and she couldn't help it, but her own unblemished morality (she meant her virginity) was stronger than even the friendship they'd once had. Ellie tried to feel sorry and guilty, but she could not. For these lesser feelings would demand that she break from the grasp of the single and loathsome thing that now possessed her:

a faceless thing, that she could not name guilt or fear or loneliness. She could only feel its power, and in strange, terrible moments know it meant surely to destroy her. So this thing kept Ellie confined in ignorance of what was happening outside herself. While all Pocanta raged and tossed upon its sea of whispers and covert glances, there was only Ellie and her father who could not guess the horror beneath. They had not heard the hissing of the word itself.

It was amazing to see the new vigor with which most of the older children of Pocanta applied themselves to their dictionary studies. It was Jeanne Turner who first discovered for all of them that the word was spelled i-n-c, not i-n-s. And her victory put the children of Pocanta in a position of knowing and understanding at least equal to that of most of the adults.

It was because of this deluge of Knowledge that swept through Pocanta that the scene between Frank Jacobs, Karl Sumner and Ellie was not of the usual or expected sort.

Frank Jacobs had prolonged the interview with Karl, half hoping, half praying, that he and Ellie might be mistaken. But as the weeks passed, Jacobs felt himself sinking into the certainty that his daughter was with child. Now he struggled with the truth of the thing, trying to find in himself the feelings, the words, the actions that would not let him do to her what he had done so long before to her Aunt Bertha. He was weak enough to long ardently for his dead wife, and just strong enough to know this weakness, and to believe that whatever must be done for Ellie, he must do for her himself. Yet there were long hours in the night when Jacobs would feel his resoluteness drain from him and he would call his forbearance toward her weakness, and wish he had the strength left to see her and her bastard child as sin. Then a confused and feverish sleep in which he could not distinguish love from hate, strength from weakness, desire from dread would crawl slowly over him. He would wake exhausted, but glad to be done with the night.

So it was late in the afternoon of the Friday before the Sunday of the ice-cream social, the same Sunday of Frank and Ellie's remarkable appearance in church, that Karl Sumner came to the Jacobs' farm. He sat stiffly next to Ellie on the divan, facing Frank Jacobs across the room. The man sat as stiffly as the boy.

"I thought you might come sooner, Karl...on your own. But I guess maybe you were afraid of me, right?"

"I couldn't come. That is, I don't see why you thought I..." Karl's voice neither faded nor dropped. It just stopped. Ellie plucked nervously for his hand without looking at him. Her eyes were fixed on her father's face. But when her hand touched his, he withdrew his as quickly as if her touch had burned. Ellie turned then to look at him. But Karl's eyes were also fixed in the direction of her father, but above his head and out the window behind him. Karl was staring dumbly into the setting sun.

"Look here, Karl...I know it was you that got Ellie pregnant. But I'm not blaming anybody. God knows I wish it wasn't true...but Ellie says she loves you and you love her. And that you're the only one ever. She means ever again, too. I believe her. I want you to be married. Right away. And it's...I mean to say it would be with my blessing."

While Frank Jacobs spoke, Karl had seemed to press himself harder and harder against the divan, as if trying to recede into the patterned fabric itself and so obscured from the direct, expressionless gaze of Jacobs. But as Jacobs finished speaking, Karl lurched to his feet. His long, young body seemed crazily bent at every joint and convulsed in jerks.

"Your blessing! We don't need your blessing. I mean I don't - there can't be a wedding - not now - not ever - not between me and Ellie."

Karl rocked and stumbled toward the door. Frank Jacobs and Ellie sat as they were, caught in the rigid awkward postures of disbelief. The sun washed

into the room now in its evening redness and covered the room and the three of them in its hot, dying glow. Jacobs reached up behind him, never taking his eyes from Karl and pulled the shade down to the sill.

With his other hand he lit the lamp on the table beside him. Then he rose. Something in his movements terrified Ellie. It seemed the gross thing inside her, for that moment, had a face...the face of her father in the act of murder.

"Pa!" Ellie had screamed and jumped to her feet. Her father did not hear her.

"Why not? Why can't you marry Ellie? The child's yours, ain't it? Why not?"

Karl had his hands clenched about the doorknob. His head was lowered and pressed against the door.

"It's my child. It's just that nobody would believe it now."

"Why not? What are they saying? Tell me what they're saying!" Jacobs' voice seemed to have dropped into the well of himself, and sounded dully, distantly from its very bottom.

"I didn't say anybody was saying anything. I just said..."

"I know that town. What are they saying? You tell me!"

Jacobs stretched out his hands and took a step towards Karl. Karl wheeled to face Jacobs and in the same movement jerked open the door. The thick, red glow poured through the open door in a single shaft that now encompassed only Karl.

"They're saying...they're saying...good God, Mr. Jacobs - I could stand in the middle of the town square and shout at them it was me, but it wouldn't matter now. Don't you understand? They wouldn't believe me. They wouldn't even hear me!"

"Tell me what they're saying. Please. Please tell me. Is it they think there's been so many? It's someone else? Karl! You're going to tell me, boy..."

Jacobs' voice was suddenly hoarse. He took another step toward Karl, his outstretched arms now flailing the emptiness before him. Karl leaped through the door to the porch.

"One thing...one thing...I do love Ellie. I do love her." Karl had turned and run down the steps. He was crying. But still he shouted back to them in the house even as he ran: "I can't help it...I didn't start it...But I do love her." And Karl was gone. Ellie and Frank Jacobs heard the slam of his car door and the clank and rattle of his car starting. The motor caught and in moments the clatter, and the humming of the engine had faded into the stillness. And yet Ellie and her father stood where they were - listening. It was then Frank Jacobs first thought of Reverend Johnson. And it was then Ellie first thought she felt the child inside her move.

All this, then, lay behind that particular Sunday morning in August. All this was the past, dark and intertwined: twisted roots that spread and strangled one another in their blind gropings. Roots so deep and thick it was too late to cut away and destroy the thing that was writhing out of them into its bleak and deadly shape above the earth: the thing that was the present.

The hot, anxious congregation waited with almost noisy impatience for the final amen of the Reverend's blessing. Somehow they had endured the heat, the endless sermon, the prolonged prayers, but Reverend Johnson had never again recaptured them once he abandoned Satan. The organ now wailed its last thin note of the answering amen to give him time to stride from his pulpit to the entrance of his church, where he greeted his members and waited solemnly for their weekly praise of his work. Then the organ burst into loud chords; the First

Methodists of Pocanta rose, tugged at their clothes which stuck clammy to their bodies, and began to file into the aisles. But the rambling procession soon halted, and heads bobbed up and down on straining necks to see; Frank and Ellie Jacobs had been sitting in a rear pew and were the first to pass the Reverend on their way out. Those at the front of the church envied those at the back their closeness to anything that might pass between the Reverend and the Jacobs. Among those at the front were the Meeches, and Mrs. Meech surely cursed her misfortune to be so far from the scene as much as she had earlier obviously relished her trip down the center aisle to her position in one of the forward pews. Among those at the rear of the church were the Sumners. And in the oppressive heat, Karl felt a strange chill pass over him as he heard Frank Jacobs' harsh whisper:

"I've got to talk to you, Reverend Johnson."

"Wait a moment. Let me see the others out."

"Now...I've got to talk to you now."

"Yes, yes...but let the people out. Wait for me in my office. Down the side aisle, the door on the left. Go on now, Jacobs. I'll be along when I can. Go on."

Frank Jacobs said nothing more but turned back into the church and started down the aisle. By his blank face, I could not know whether he felt every eye upon him as he passed. Ellie followed close behind him.

"Everett?" My own voice rose and cracked loudly in my ears. My husband kept Mrs. Turner's hand in his, but raised his eyes to me. The others turned.

"Just as usual, Sister Barbara. Everything as usual." The usual was that I should put the things of his altar and his study in order. I turned and hurried after Frank and Ellie down the aisle. When they reached the study door, they stopped. Jacobs turned to Ellie. He did not seem to see me where I had

stopped mid-way down the aisle. But I felt my face burn with embarrassment - I felt myself to be the rudest of intruders. But he spoke to Ellie as though I were not there.

"You wait here. This is a hard thing for me, coming to him like this. You just better wait out here."

So Ellie turned from him and took a seat in a front pew. She never once looked up at me. Her father went into my husband's office and left the door ajar. I still stood in the side aisle - rooted there by the sense of my own futility. There was so much I would say to this girl, but the words I wanted were gone - buried under fifteen years of Pocanta. And I knew no more than what was whispered of Ellie and her father. What was one to say? It is not your sin, child...it is your father's...a thousand thoughts seemed to rush and break in my mind, but all I knew was the heat...the dead, white heat that enmeshed us all...it's not your father's...it's the heat...it's your baby. That's what I meant to say...let me have your baby. You go away from here...let me have...

Everett was striding down the center aisle. He glared across at me as he walked and jerked his head toward the back of the church. Then Ellie raised her head and turned it to him. He did not look at her. I saw his mouth twitch as he passed in front of her, and then he was gone. The door to his office clicked shut behind him; he was alone with Ellie's father; I was yet alone with Ellie. The wildness and the heat began to churn again in my brain. Then there was the soft thud of feet coming quickly down the aisle: it was little Freddy Sumner. He brushed by me and ran to Ellie.

"Here!" he whispered. And he thrust a piece of paper into her hands. The paper had been folded and refolded a dozen times, and it shook and crackled in her hands as she tried to undo it. I made no decision; I felt no compunction:

I simply moved soundlessly behind her and read:

"I do love you, Ellie. I'm ashamed and I'm sorry - but I can't help it. I've tried to think how I could, but I can't. I do love you though, Ellie. But in all the wrong ways I guess."

It was hurriedly sprawled and unsigned. But I knew. The sound of their whispers, and the sight of their evil, pious faces swelled within me and burst.

"Ellie!" I put my hand on her shoulder. I felt her body convulse under my touch as she spun to face me.

"Mrs. Johnson!"

"It's not your father...They've lied. All of them have..."

The office door banged open. Her father's hand still grasped the knob. His mouth worked open and shut but no sound came. From somewhere inside the office Everett's voice shouted:

"...and I thought you came to me to repent. But this. I won't have this. Trying to pass your sin off on an innocent boy! Get out, Jacobs! Get out - before I forget my calling."

Jacobs grabbed blindly for Ellie's hand and pulled her to her feet behind him as he rushed up the aisle. I ran after them and caught Jacob's arm. Everett's voice rang behind us.

"Get on your knees, man...you get on your knees and pray...then come to me when you've seen the truth, Jacobs! Do you hear me? The truth for you and that poor girl of yours!"

Jacobs started to pull from me, but I held his arm.

"Listen to me - all of you. Please listen."

Jacobs wrenched his arm from my grasp. "You leave us alone!" And they rushed from me. As they reached the back pews and turned behind them to get to the center door, Jacobs and Ellie stopped and turned. They stared dumbly across the rows of empty pews at Everett who stood, darkly framed, in his office door.

As I stared at him, hatred resurged with a fury I'd never known. And I felt my whole being call upon God with a fervor I thought forever lost to me. And I heard my own voice rise and shriek my prayer:

"God...God! Damn him!"

Everett's face whitened and seemed to lose its flesh. He stepped slowly back into the dimness of his office and flung shut the door.

I turned to face Jacobs, but wordlessly he spun about and jerked Ellie after him. I ran up the aisle, but when I reached the door they were already running across the church lawn. The gravel flew up in little spouts as they crossed the church lot to their truck. Once inside, Jacobs forced the gears until they screeched at his haste. I tried to call out to them, but my voice was lost in the squall of sounds from the truck. I watched them disappear down the street.

The hastily strung flags, each of a delicate pastel hue, fluttered daintily in the freshening breeze that had sprung minutes before from the south. The ladies' pale, flowered dresses and strands of their tightly curled hair whipped lightly in the soft-rising wind. As they scooped, dished, and served the ice-cream and paced airily back and forth across the lawn, I knew each felt the delicious exultation of success pulse inside her. The ice-cream social was a success: a grander success than any of them had dared to hope.

I saw Everett seat himself under a tree and gather about him some of the more prominent men of the church. When they were sure they had commented sufficiently on the ladies' efforts and the worthiness of the social fund, they were free to speak manfully among themselves of the crime of Frank Jacobs. But it was only to Everett that any of them gave real attention. I knew what he would be saying.

"I tell you, gentlemen, it was more than I could take. Why, it would test

the mercies of the Lord Himself...him standing there and naming one of our own fine young men. But I kept my head. My Christian duty shone clearly. I exhorted him to prayer. And I have prayed too: for forgiveness. When I was out to his place sometime back I thought there was something peculiar about him saying he had nothing to say that would be proper listening for a man of God. After all, there's nothing that isn't proper listening for us; it is part of our duty to listen. Then show the way. I know now it was just his conscience aching and burning inside him. Part of God's punishment - his not being able to tell me. But sometimes I have the terrible feeling I failed when I didn't hear the voice underneath. That's why I pray for forgiveness, gentlemen. The way of Christian duty is never the easy one."

I watched him lean his head against the tree, and knew he waited for a torrent of their approval and justification. I stooped to examine the sore knee of a child who had fallen near his group.

"Who'd he name?" one of them asked. This blunt unconcern for Everett's problem amused me; the more, because I could guess how much it shocked him.

"Ah...ah, that I cannot reveal to you Mr. Turner. Why attach the poor lad's name to it, no matter how innocently? No good could come of it, no good at all."

"Right", one of them said, "Of course the Reverend is right."

I could no longer detain the child. As I rose, I saw Mr. Sumner among them nodding his head in mute, but profound agreement.

And so the afternoon slithered lightly past. The men repeated the Reverend's remarks to their women, and the women recited them to each other. By the time the light south breeze had risen to a steady wind, and the sun was again behind its leaden haze, at least a dozen of the young men of Pocanta had been named The One so unjustly accused by the Vicious Jacobs. I moved among them

and listened to them and my contempt for them had new edge: I could savor how they would feel when they learned the truth from me. But the reality of telling them frightened me.

The scene on the church lawn that had been a flurry of pastels and small movements was blown into a harsh blur. The pennants flapped and tore. The women snatched at their stiffly billowing skirts and at their hair. The men, solemn and awkward in their haste, their neckties whipped about behind their heads, sprawled across the sawhorse tables, trying to catch into wads the blowing, shredding paper of the table covers. Others hurried to cover the big ice-cream containers, while still others lifted the boards from the saw horses and ran with them toward the church basement. Amidst it all stood Mrs. Meech, bitterly damning the weather and this vile chaos that rendered her clean-up committee useless. Then the first scattered drops of rain began to fall, and the scurrying to and from the church basement became even more frantic.

"Listen to me!" A woman's scream rose high, alone, horribly above the noise of the people and the rain. The mass of moving, churning bodies froze. All were caught by the awful sound.

"They're dead. They're dead! He even shot the dog. Ellie and Frank... They're dead."

The woman ran among them: the only live, moving thing among the oddly assorted statues. The rain fell quietly in closer, smaller drops and still none of them moved. The woman covered her face with her hands and slumped to a forgotten folding chair still standing beneath the trees. Then, as one, they herded toward her and pressed in upon her in a tightening knot. Their voices rose in an unintelligible, pitilessly animal babble. No one had seen the Townsend's battered Ford lurch to a halt across the street. No one looked at it now. If they had, they would have seen Jim Townsend's face peering at them,

trying to peer through them to his wife, still sobbing in the lone chair. And in the back seat of the car I saw them: the stony, vacant faces of the three younger Jacobs children, not looking at them, or at anything...

Mrs. Townsend was trying to explain...she had kept the children at her farm so Frank and Ellie could go to church, but they had never come back and... in that instant my contempt for them burned away and in its place came the deepest guilt. It was my weakness as much as their ignorance that had killed them. But I had lost the battle for them fifteen years ago.

Aftermath

The wind had died, but the sound of it was in their whispers:

"They say there was a note...a confession of sorts...he says he loved her in all the wrong ways."

"Shot her right through the back of the head."

"I told you bad blood would out...there was that sister, Bertha..."

"Blew nearly half his own head straight off..."

"First incest...now this. He was insane...insane."

There was a double funeral for Ellie and Frank. They were buried from Slade's Funeral Home, rather than the church, but all the church people were there. In fact, it was the fund from the ice-cream social that paid for their headstones, which were placed on either side of Mildred's. The three younger Jacobs children were removed from Pocanta. I begged Everett to let us take them in, but he said I was hardly a fit wife and he could not take it upon his conscience to burden them with an unfit mother. So the good Reverend himself drove them to the city and saw them properly installed there in a children's home. I was gone before he returned.

Even where I am now, That Awful Jacobs Affair is repeated, alluded to. At

first I tried to tell these people what I have written here - but they clung fiercely to what they knew. So I have learned - wherever I am, I have never moved away from Pocanta.

THE MIDDLETON MUSE

After three weeks of listening to him bang and pound away at that lump of rock of his, I begun to wonder just how awful smart I was. The money she'd pay me for givin' 'im house room still looked grand - I mean sounded grand - I'd not seen a cent of it yet.

But on th' other hand, my back room had always been a favorite spot with the boys and not a one of 'em'd come around now on account of that stuck-up alien. The first couple a' weeks they'd come and had a good deal of fun discussin' art and arteests so's it was in his earshot. At first, they thought they'd done themselves rather proud and considered it a downright favor to him - talkin' all the time about his main interest that way. They'd usually get off on September Morn - they all knowed it and liked it well enough. Maybe one of 'em'd say something like, "How do you like September in the Morning, Will?" and maybe Will would say "I never had nothing like that in my swimmin' hole, did you boys?" And then they'd laugh that around a bit. But that sculpture fellow he just kept bangin' and choppin' away at his hunk a' stone with never a thankee to the lot of 'em, or even a "Do tell - I never knowed you knowed so much about art - it do make a body feel at home!"

Well, let me tell you - after a couple days of gettin' no rise out of him at all, they dropped off bein' so polite theirselves - I could of almost felt sorry for 'im if he'd showed they was gettin' to 'im at all. But no, blast him, he didn't once pay them no mind what soever. Oh, once in a while he would let out with a moon dew or a sacred blue but he was always addressin' these queer remarks to his rock and never to the boys or me. So that's how they quit comin' around at all.

I believe I said Mrs. Fendright was payin' me to give 'im house room. Well, this is not correctly exact. It was actually more like garage room -

garage back-room-room if you want it really technical.

You see, I was the best and only auto mechanic in Middleton - and she, Mrs. Fendright that is, was forever bringin' her Apperson Eight in for some little tick or rattle. To be right frank about the whole thing, she was about the only one who brung any kind of auto-mobile in for any thing, and that is because she was about the only one who had any automobile at all. But because she did have one, as I said, and because she thought it always needed fixin', and because I was the only one who had even half a notion about the kind of fixin' to give it, she come in one day with a big sign already painted up:

SAMUEL SMALL
AUTO-MOBILE MECHANIC,
EXTRAORDINAIRE

Well, if that didn't just about bust me blue. And for a couple of reasons. First place, everybody knowed me as Sog - and Samuel was like somebody's name I or they didn't even know. Also, everybody knowed I done many more things and more regularly than tinker on her crate! I always said I could fix anythin' busted if it wasn't busted in more than a thousan' pieces - and everybody knowed I said it and mostly believed it was true. Besides that, I was no mean blacksmith. There was another one of these too - blacksmiths, I mean - old George Eames. We saw to it we got pretty even work: If I was full up I'd send work over to him, and if he was full he'd send a man to me. Also, that Extraordinaire just did not set right: my idea of it was sort of fuzzy, but it looked to me awfully high-flown and braggy - in a dishonest sort of way, and I am not for that kind of thing.

So I told her thanks mightily, but the sign would not do. Besides I had one already. When I was shut for the night I had one, that is. With my two big front doors closed together it was right there,

SOG'S REPAIRS

I'd painted it not even five years before in big black letters (a little skee-gogglin', I do hate to admit). Well she allowed how maybe my name would have to be my own affair. And she also supposed she hadn't the time to make me see the point of Extraordinaire, for I probably hadn't the stuff to see it with. But she stuck on Auto-mobile Mechanic and would not let even "Smithy and General Repairs" be tacked on. She said she was not about to take her Apperson to anyone who was less than a "Specialist," no more than she would take her "Mall-eeze" (whatever that is) to a horse doctor.. I allowed to myself how he would not think so much of the difference because she was about the size, and in certain respects the shape of the rest of his patients. In fact, I considered to myself giving up the whole business of the sign all together. But when she said she'd give me a week's free advertising in the Meteor (she was the owner, you know), I didn't see no harm so long as she'd have the new sign painted up and pester me no more about it. Which she did - had the sign painted up. When I first saw it, I thought it sort of wastefully generous of her, for it was painted on both sides the same thing

SOG SMALL
AUTO-MOBILE MECHANIC

and I took it and nailed it over my old sign. I put its left edge right evenly along the inside edge of the right door so that on either side of it, my big black letters read SOGS AIRS. Well let me tell you, I did take some joshing for that from the boys. They could be right funny when they had half a mind. But Mrs. Fendright did not see it was so funny. From what she said, I figured it appeared to her I always did have but half a mind - truly. She'd had the idea I should hang that sign on a pole stuck out on my garage. Well, at least that accounted for her wastefulness of having it painted on two sides - it was a relief too, because I'd never knowed her to be wasteful or unnecessarily

generous before, and it didn't leave me with nothin' difficult to ponder in her character. In fact, she stuck so true to her ugly form, she allowed that since I had used but half the sign, I'd get but half a week's advertising. And since the paper come out but three times a week and half of a week is three and a half days, it was clear which three and a half days she was aimin' to give me. Anyway, I got no free advertising for putting up with that balmy sign, but I got lots of laughs out of it with the boys. Enough laughs, almost, to make up for her calling me Samuel Small, Auto-mobile Mechanic Extraordinaire in one of her columns called "New Sights to See in Middleton."

Well, it wasn't too long after this sign business I've made mention of here that she rolls her Apperson in here again and calls to me, just as nice, her "Dear Mr. Small" this, and "My dear Mr. Small" that, so that I knew straight off she wanted something in the worst way. It come out soon enough what that something was. She was aiming to beautify Middleton. I couldn't see my place in that - and besides, Middleton had always looked pretty good to me. But that was her way. Nothing was ever good enough for her. I used to wonder why she didn't just pick up and go some fancier place once old Fendright died. Then I thunk it out. Fancy places, and in big places, Mrs. Fendright might be just another body. But in Middleton, she was somebody - in fact, in more ways than one, she was the biggest body in town. And it give her particular pleasure to make nobodies out of the rest of us whenever she took the notion. More than once she and that newspaper of hers might of gotten her lynched if we wasn't all so blasted civilized, and - how I hate to admit this fact - if we wasn't all so blasted scared of her.

But I am getting ahead of myself. Anyway, her latest scheme seemed harmless enough, so I listened to her go on and on about the "sordid" look of things in our town. However, when she finally got around to how she planned to launch

this grand project, I come near to laughing out loud. She was going to have a statue of her own self done and put smack in the park. I figured if it was a good likeness, she'd of set her own project back by fifty years - at the very least. I just couldn't listen too well after that. Oh, I caught words like "Grecian drape" and "classical" and "uplifting," and that general sort - but I was busy thinkin' how the boys' faces would look when I'd tell 'em we was to have a statue of her right square in the park where times was they sometimes liked to sit. I guessed they'd sit there a good deal oftener now for the sight of old lady Fendright wrapped in some Greek's old curtain. She caught me by the ear again though when she said there'd be money in it for me. I listened real good now to see just how that might be. Seems she wanted this statue done on the sly so's it would be a "Happy Surprise" for the town. (I supposed nobody'd have a stroke on the spot from the happiness of the thing.) And the likeliest spot for her to get her statue snuck into being was right in my back room. Also, I had doors on my place - George Eames just had old tarps he'd tie down nights. And they was big doors so her masterpiece could be wheeled right through and pushed the block up to the park. Also, I had the wheels. Once I'd got a solid oak table for next to nothing at auction and I'd got the top off it and set it on several pairs of old roller skate wheels. It was carved a mite fancy, but it didn't notice much when I had my bins and barrels loaded on it. Got the idea once when I'd had to lug a couple crates from the railway tracks a whole block away. (The other way from the park, of course). And it was uphill haulin' all the way. 'Course, I never had no call to use my contraption on account of I got stuff off the railway only that once. But it appeared I'd have a chance to use it now.

She didn't like it much, I could tell, having to deal with me again. She'd never quite got over our sign transaction. But since I was the likeliest - since it was me or nobody, and since she was too hell-bent on gettin' that statue

of herself, she was not about to let a little thing like me stand in her way. I might say I didn't think much more of dealin' with her but the money did seem nice. But so's you won't be tempted to say I'm the two-faced sort, let me explain a thing or two. As many people as there was as come near hatin' Mrs. Fendright, (and I was right there in the middle of 'em), there didn't seem no real harm in havin' a statue of her. There'd be so much laughin' and sneezin' at it, I figured the whole town might git a lift. And you could always kick it when you got real sore at her. And there was always awful things in the night that could happen to statues. So I didn't feel too dismal about being a party to it. And as nice as the money sounded, (it's a hateful thing to admit of your own self) I'm not so sure but I'd of riz above my principles and taken the job anyway.

For a couple of weeks I didn't hear much more about it. Of course, I told the boys, first chance, and their faces was a sight to see. But what bothered me a little was that one or two of 'em didn't take good-humorously to the idea of a statue of Mrs. Fendright at all. In fact, they seemed right put out with the whole idea. One of 'em talked about the park being public property and her having no right; another went on about how bad it would be for some of the folks she'd stepped on around town. I say some of the folks, 'cause a good many of 'em moved off after Mrs. F. and her newspaper was done with 'em. But I'm gettin' a mite ahead again.

The next thing I did hear was from Marmie - she's my wife, you know. She'd got it from the ladies this way: Mrs. Fendright got hold of Lloyd Garvey, and gave him the job of hiring a sculpturer.

Lloyd used to be a pretty hot-shot lawyer around these parts, but year by year he seemed to get a little less hot and a little more shot. It was a real shame too, 'cause Lloyd was a real decent man. Some folks said it was because

of Lucy Franklin. He was wall-eyed over her for years, but she upped and married Jasper Fendright - or more exactly, she upped and married Jasper Fendright's money. I always figured there must a' been a whale of a difference between Lucy Franklin and Mrs. Lucy Fendright, on account of Lloyd always seemed the sensible sort to me. But the truth is he never did marry, and after Jasper died, his pride wouldn't let him go to her a wooin' again, so he come to be what the women-folk love to call her confidanty. He was a close to a real friend as she had, too.

But as I say, Lloyd was nobody's fool - even the best of us git took in by some female once in our life. And he seemed mostly good to all of us. Now when she, Mrs. Fendright, asked him to get a sculpturer for her. she made it terrible plain that she wanted nothin' but a genuine, European-type arteest. Word got around like always, so it was no surprise at all when this here Pierre Bohne showed up. He was just too much of what we all was half afraid, half hopin' he would be.

He had one of them drooping, pancake-like hats (berry hats is what you call them), and one of them ties as wide and bowed and silky as the sash on your little sister's dress. His coat was the brassiest blue you ever saw and his pants was all black an' sort of tight. Well, you'd of thought he was decked out in a costume to look like an arteest, he looked so much like a arteest. And he acted like you'd figure one of 'em would too. Oh, how he would let flutter with them skinny white hands of his - it was a sight. If he couldn't get the American word he wanted on his tongue, seemed he'd try writin' it in the air. And when he did talk, it was all full of "Zeee's" and "Eeeee's" and "Oooo's". I reckon I was glad right off he didn't talk much - it plumb wore a body out to listen.

Well Lloyd, Mr. Garvey, that is, he brought him around to the garage after he'd set him up over at the boarding house. Me and the boys was all there, and

damned if Marmie don't pop herself in too, sayin' how she'd forgot the pickles in my dinner pail. It wasn't no pickles for me that brung her 'round. She would be first of the ladies to have a real close look at him and you could see her fairly bustin' with the knowledge of this marvelous fact. She didn't get off much more than a How d'ya do at him, but it was enough for her. She walked out of there four feet off the ground - still clutchin' the sack of pickles.

Which all brings us about to the point where I begun tellin' you this. The boys tried to make do with him as long as they could, but he didn't take to 'em politely, so there you are - I was stuck with him all to myself, except when Mrs. F. would come noseying around - which at this early time in his work wasn't too often.

Well, this particular day I've been meanin' to tell you about begun just like all the rest of 'em - 'cept maybe it was even a little hotter than hotter than sin. He banged away on his rock, and I banged away on some shears for old Jenkins and I suppose we'd of kept it up that way all day if all of a sudden he didn't let out with the awfulest squawk heard since idiot Joe got drunk in Ruddy's hen-house. Now there is a funny story. But maybe I'd best get along with this one. Anyway, Pierre gives a hoot that's like to never quit, then falls to a cussin' that, Fransez or Middleton-er, it makes itself very plain.

I thunk it over. I decided that furn or no, he sounded like he might like the presents of another human body. So I ambled on back to him in a rushy sort of way, but all the time thinkin' how I'd tell him a few things myself if he told me to mind my own business - after me just wantin' to help and all he'd have a real nerve to give me a bad time of it! So I says to him:

"I figgered you didn't want no help anyway!"

Well the look that come in his face didn't say no such thing.

"I mean, I figgered you might not take to me buttin' in but I'd be glad to butt if you want - What's the matter?"

He stuck his thumb up in my face and I sorta crossed my eyes at it. It sure enough look liked Jack Horner's straight outen the pie - but this plum and thumb was one and the same thing.

"You hurt yer thumb?"

"Yes. I mean wee."

"No. I mean you. You hurt yer thumb?"

"Yes!"

"I got some salve."

"Do you?"

"Yep."

"That's nice!" He fairly yelled at me in a real loud whisper and all the time joggin' from one foot to the other, squeezin' his hand between his knees and then under his other arm. Well he'd sort of throwed the ball right back in my own lap, so to speak, so I come right out with it.

"You want some?"

"Some what, Mr. Small - some what?"

"Why some salve, Mr. Boney. You know - the salve I said I got."

"Yes. Please. Anything."

I dug around a bit then and finally found the stuff. I noticed he made a face when I took the lid off - but I suppose it is a mite powerful the first time for anybody. Then I seed he wasn't makin' no move to dip into that fine healin' balm, so I did. But quick as quick he dabs out a heap and plasters it over his own thumb. He looked terrible white - more so even than usual. I felt all-out sorry for 'im. But his accident give me another kind of real bad moment too.

"This here misluck with the finger - will it be layin' you off the job fer a while?"

"Ah no. No, no, no, no, no."

But my face must have had what I was thinkin' in big bold letters.

"I am sar-ee your friends - ze boys - zey do not come here any more. It is because of me. Zey do not like me. But you - you 'ave been most ze kind to me when I've cause you so much ze trou-bal. I will fee-neesh as soon as I can."

Well! Such direct speakin' from a blamed alien really gave me a jab at the insides...it takes a body back enough to meet up with out and out truth in a American - for one so rarely do - but in a furriner! Well! It made me feel sore 'shamed. I know just about how kind I'd been to Mr. Boney. I was a stutterin' and a stammerin' in my own head before I ever said a word.

"Now Mr. Boney...Look here...it ain't that...I mean..." I stopped and pulled myself to. It wasn't right to let no Frenchman beat out me, a native, at truth tellin'. So I says:

"Friend you shore hit the nail on the head and druve it clean in. Exceptin' for the kindness part..."

That was as far as I could get without seein' how terrible silly the whole business could get. So I just set my mind to doin' instead of talkin'.

"I just had a thought. Let's us set a spell and lift a couple."

Pierre looked plumb surprised and allowed as how he didn't see as he should and all that bother. But I finally got him convinced. If somebody'd told me just fifteen minutes before I'd ever get such a thought, I'd of told them they'd best give up chewin' loco-weed. And how it comes I could have such a thought needs a bit of explainin'. And since it all sort of ties up with Mrs. Fendright again, I will so explain.

It used to be a body could sneak a snort or two around here without a whole lot of sneakin' to it. But the good Lord and Lucy Fendright help us, if she

didn't make things so hot for us that - well anyway, she got to us through the ladies, and she got to the ladies through the Lord: harpin' at our women in meetin's and in that paper of hers how they ought to feel a powerful Christian duty to keep us men and not likkered-up animals. Marmie was no smarter than the rest of 'em - she got her licks in at me too. But I am glad to report Lucy Fendright used the Lord's name mostly in vain: None but the very weakest among us give up a speck of our fun. We just got real careful, that's all. So that's how I come to stash what little I could get in the bottoms of the barrels in my garage. And there was one choice jug I was savin' for some time special, and I figgered this was as special as any. So after searchin' through only three or four of my barrels, I found 'er - all wrapped up so nice in some old oil rags. The oil on 'em was mostly from Lucy's old heap - which knowin' give me a kick before I ever got the cork out.

First I takes a long sweet guzzle - wipes the jug off on my sleeve and passes it to Pierre. He looks at my sleeve and then at the jug sort of funny like, but then he takes a swig hisself. He didn't choke but only a little.

I says, "How's that fer real likker?"

He just stood there with his eyes a-waterin'. Then he says, "Eet is not so ze bad."

"Looky here, buster, eet ees the best around here by a dam site!"

As if he was settin' out on his own to prove what I said, he takes a real long, slow swaller. "Bustair, you are so ze right."

So he laughs 'nd I laugh. He drinks 'nd I drink. And pretty soon we was both laughin' and joshin' as good as if we was both Americans. In fact, Pierre even come to sound more 'nd more like a American to me - that's what good likker can do fer friendship, I allowed to myself. Like I always did say - you can't not like a fellow with which you can get a little 'roarin' with.

But pretty soon it come to me I'd not so much as winked at the dinner pail Marmie'd sent along with me that morning. Now I just could've throwed it away 'nd Marmie'd never knowed the difference. But that would've been a mite wasteful. Besides, the way she did love to fuss and bother over my dinner pail - well, I figgered a bit of food wouldn't hurt either one of us too much neither. So I gave the idea to Pierre, sayin' how I did hate to bust in on our little fun, but he was right sociable by now and allowed he was hungry. So we et. We didn't talk much - Marmie did have a way with chicken, I must admit.

By 'nd by though I growed pretty curious about how Pierre really come to take this here job, him bein' such a great man in his own home town and all. Well, he was sort of cagey.

"I felt Mrs. Fendright should employ an American to sculpt of her statue... I feel an American could so better know the spirit of ze American press. But Mr. Garvey say she insist the taste would be all wrong. That I as French could give to it a feeling classical."

I come near biting my finger instead of the chicken leg.

"That sounds like something she'd say, all right. Americans not classy enough for her."

"You do not like her then - thees Mrs. Fendright?"

"Like her? It's a crime against my own digestion to even talk about 'er while I'm eatin'."

And I knowed, I knowed right then from the way I was talking with not so much as thinkin' what was comin' next that I was a low-down miserable man. Man! Pshaw! I was nothin' but a weak sister. Lettin' her hornswoggle me with her money into helpin' her bring that thing of her to roost in our park.

"She does appear to like to dominate, but..."

"Appear like! Son, she loves playin' queen-bee over all of us. Why dam-Sam

if a body can uncork a jug but she don't smell it out."

And I got real thirsty again. So awful thirsty I remembered where I had a couple more of them fine little ladies stashed. 'Nd while I was fishin' one of 'em out, somethin' else come to me too. I'd got all silly-sappy over Marmie and that blasted dinner pail and it don't make no matter how good it tasted, here we was not laughin' it up no more but almost plumb sober. Why it was like Marmie was still reformin' me when she wasn't no ways near me - why, it was like the hand from beyond the grave, or somethin' - what-ever it was it made me mad. I uncorked our new lady-friend 'nd would've drained 'er in one whomp if'n I could've.

Pierre got hold of some o' my spirit too, and we went at downin' them jugs like we was killin' snakes. The more I drunk the easier it come to remember all them hateful things Lucy Fendright'd done. I was capping it off with what poor Elsie Jansen got for bein' just a good, generous, likeable sort.

"She run just the nicest little cafe. But Lucy gets it in 'er head Elsie's dishin' out more'n just the wholesome vittles. So pretty soon she prints some real insinuat'in' bunk that makes Elsie just close up shop and head out."

"This Mrs. Jansen - she could not go to the law?"

"What for? It'd cost her more'n she'd got to do anythin'. Besides, Lucy couldn't maybe prove what she writ, but Elsie couldn't un-prove it neither. We did hate to see her go, though."

Pierre didn't say much of nothin' so I figgered I'd give him one more helpin' of Lucy Fendright - it was the one that alus sort of stuck in my craw the most anyway.

"Then there's alus what she done to them poor little Sutton kiddies. Judge Parker was wantin' to start a big collection to get money for 'em, but the word got out Lucy wouldn't give a dime to help "that cabin trash," as she

called 'em. They kept to theirselves in a little old wood place on the edge of town. But the Judge lets on to her he won't help her none with her anti-alkyhol goin's on either. So sure enough. Lucy forks over a tidy sum. And the very next time it come out, right there in the middle of the page, all in big, fancy type is "The Glow one gets in the Heart from Giving." That gives me a real sharp pain elsewheres."

"Ah, but Sog, she did give the money!"

"Why sure she give it! She got their poor bedfast old pa so grateful he deeds her the land and the care of his kiddies when he goes on. Why nobody even knowed he owned all that land. But you can bet your right eye and left ear Lucy knowed it afore she sprouted them wings and took to flappin' over 'em. Oh 'nd she took care of the kiddies all right. Poor old Sutton wasn't even settled good in 'is coffin but she got 'em shipped off to they's folks in Missouri that's already got such a brood they come near not eatin' cept ever other day. Leastwise that's how folks tell it 'round here."

All the time Pierre was sippin' and a listenin'.

"She eeze not a good woman."

"Naw. Naw, she eeze a bad woman."

We took a couple more swallers a piece.

"And now I got myself all mixed up with her. Helpin' her to erect a genuine monumental to herself. I am no good."

"She's the one that's no good!"

"Wha'd you say?"

"I say - she eeze the one that is not ze good."

"I thunk you said that. It only sounded funny."

"I's not funny. 'S not ze funny at all."

"Yer right, Pierre. Not one funny thing in th' whole cussed world."

And bein' just all wrung out thinking how un-funny Lucy Fendright and all she done was, I just up 'nd thumbbed my nose in the general direction of her office.

I heard Pierre belch and sort of giggle all in the same noise.

"That ges-taire. What does it mean?"

So I told him. He really let out laughin' now and he even got me goin' too. With just a little proddin' I even thunk of where our last friend was. I pulled 'er out 'nd we was off like it was the last little jug in the world.

Well, just what we said nor how we said it, we could not of told you once the words was outen our mouths. We had sort of tied one on. But the gist of it's all I need to let you in on anyway - and believe you me, it's a gist and a half. What I mean to say is it's Pierre. He was not no Frenchman at all. That's right. He was not hardly no furriner neither. He was a backeast American - a New York City, New York American. And that's pretty close enough American for me anyways as if he come from Middleton in Munster County.

I don't need to paint no pictures of the laughin' and whoopin' we give out with then. Tom said (Pierre's real name was Tom Bartwell, you know) he said Lloyd Garvey's knowed his pa at school a long time back when they was just learnin' the law trade. The story I got from Lloyd sometime later was this: it come about that after school was out for good for the two of 'em they wrote back and forth a good deal and figured on always bein' real good friends. But when Tom's pa got married and had a son and all. Lloyd kind of left off writin' - he was chasin' after Lucy then in his own heart and wasn't near to catchin' her; it was just about then she ups and marries Fendright anyways. So Lloyd didn't have much to say to a real happy man like Bartwell. So pretty soon they writ each other maybe no oftener than maybe ever other Christmas.

But one year, after Tom is near a growed-up boy, Lloyd gets this real down-in-the-mouth-y letter. Seems Mr. Bartwell's wife had died and here he was mixed up in some bad business with some of them big city boys he didn't want his son to get wind of. He asks Lloyd to remember his boy's name and maybe look him up some day if he comes to the city. Well, Lloyd - he don't like the hang-dog tone of this letter one little bit, so he starts shootin' letters back real fast, but never gets no answer. Then he starts scrapin' together enough money to get him clear to the city and is all ready to pack himself on the train when he gets a short note from another lawyer friend of his in the same neck of the woods as Bartwell was in. Tom's pa had shot hisself - probably the same day he writ that letter to Lloyd.

Then it gets sort of tricky. It seems all this time Mr. Bartwell let on to Lloyd in his sometime letters how his boy Tom was fixin' to become a real fine lawyer - gettin' top marks in school and all. And Lloyd let on to Bartwell that he was goin' up and up in the world, when just the other way around was the case - as I've told you afore. But Bartwell bein' none the wiser passed this high-flown picture on to Tom - tellin' him if anything ever happens to him (and he knowed he was gonna make it happen right quick) he should get hold of Lloyd Garvey: that there was a really great lawyer, and even if his own pa couldn't, maybe Lloyd could get those fool art school notions out of his head. Well, poor Mr. Bartwell - he died deceived. But Tom and Lloyd finally got things right. I gues it was pretty touchy business at first, but pretty soon they both 'fessed up: Tom wrote he was no lawyer - not even a budding one; Lloyd wrote he was a lawyer all right but no great shakes like his pa thunk he was. Then Tom wrote and said he'd found out all the scandal his pa'd been pulled in on and said he was as through as through with the Law - except for

abidin' it, of course. He said he wanted more'n anything to be a really great artist and he had just about enough money to get him goin' in art school. Lloyd said he wouldn't send him no more, but he wanted him to have the money the train ticket would've cost if he'd got to make that trip to his pa on time. Tom said he would take that (and no more) 'cause he knew how Lloyd felt.

So then they left off writing for a couple years - always hopin' some day they'd get to meet. The rest is as plain as the nose on your freckled face. Lucy Fendright's deal was just too good for Lloyd not to pass on to Tom. So Tom become Pierre, and that was that.

Well, all I learned of all this the day Tom and me got as potted as two hot-house petunias was that he wasn't no Frenchman and Lloyd's part in that. And what he got from me was a few extries on Lucy Fendright. So by and by him and me come to plan a little project of our own. Tom had made a bunch of draw-in's of Lucy already, so first we had to make danged sure she wouldn't be pokin' her nose in ever whip-stitch. Tom said that was easy - and it was. He just dropped some great big hints as to how the "Patrons of de Arts" in Europe don't pester the artist none at all while he is workin' on his drawin' or his statue or what have you. Well she was gonna be a patron if it killed her, so she quit comin' round. Also, we decided the boys was a good sort, but they did love to talk - even more than I do, if you can imagine that! So we kept our secret just to ourselves - we didn't even let Lloyd in. There was no tellin' but he still loved Lucy even if he did pull this artist stunt on her. And what we was cook-in' up was no labor of love, let me tell you!

The last thing I knowed of that marvelous day was that Tom was dead asleep afore you could of said Jack Spratt. So I covered him over a bit 'nd sort of tippy-toed out. I remember thinkin' the sun'd pulled a real sneaky on me, settin' so early that way. But for all that, I couldn't help singin'. 'Nd that first

tune pops in my head was Onward Christian Soldiers. It could of been writ just for me - I was marchin' as to war, 'nd I marched 'nd sung all the way home and didn't know when I'd felt so blamed good.

Tom and me went on to our work with new spirit from then on. You'd of thunk we was just all fired up and fancy-fresh from prayer meetin' the way we layed to - always a whistlin' 'nd a laughin'. Part of this spirit might of been owin' to the fact I'd got my hands on a couple more jugs out at Chichester's place. Whatever it was, it was good some spirit moved us, 'cause Lucy told Tom the statue had to be done, placed, 'nd undraped on the Fourth of July. It didn't give us any extry amount of time - we worked plumb through the night before. I mean to say Tom worked and I kept up his spirit. Anyways, on the mornin' of the Fourth - there she was: a great, big, stone Lucy. We drunk her one whale of a toast and then passed out the word.

Lucy just about bust a gusset them last few days tryin' to get Tom to let her snitch a peek. But that boy was a real cool customer 'nd kept her off. 'Course, she sort of foxed him, too. She stuck on a fine old American custom: no payin' 'til we's seein'. It struck us pretty glum. But then I had a thought. So's not to look like I was comin' right on his heels, I went over 'nd see'd her about my money on the day before the Fourth - the Third, to be exact.

"Glad yer statue gonna be done soon, Mrs. Fendright?"

"Oh my dear Mr. Small, I can't wait!"

"That's sort of what I come about."

"What?"

"Seein' to it you don't have to wait."

"I don't think I understand you, Mr. Small."

"Oh, I think maybe you will, Mrs. Fendright. If'n you try real hard."

"Are you being insolent?"

"I don't rightly know. What I do know is me 'nd Marmie's got some things come up. What I'm sayin' is I'd like my money - now."

"You are insolent!"

"I don't reckon I know - lessen that mean I be a mite broke."

"Well that's hardly my concern. You'll get your money when I get my statue."

"Then you just come get your statue any time. Any time at all. But you ain't usin' my table to tote it on - 'nd you ain't gonna want to pay none of the boys to tote it for you. Reckon after I get done tellin' 'em about our little talk they'd come a mite too high."

"You wouldn't dare - And - I think I smell whiskey! You are drunk!"

"Well now, yer the one that'd know about that - I read all them things you writ 'nd I learnt there ain't a man can drink but he gits plumb mean. Maybe even mean enough to bust up some fine new piece of art. 'Specially if'n it was just a sittin' there desecratin' his own property!"

Well I thunk she was gonna bust me up right then from the beller she lets out. She was big enough to do it too. But she run around to her desk and jerks out a black metal box. Her hand was a-quiverin' so she come near missin' the keyhole with the key. She finally gets it open 'nd grabs out a little wad of money.

"Here! Here's your money - now you get out of my office. But I'm warnin' you, Sog Small - if there's a nick - one tiny, little nick on my statue that don't belong there, I'll - I'll have you thrown in prison!"

I took the money from her just so calm 'nd commenced countin' it - lickin' my finger tickin' off each bill real slow.

"Did you hear what I said?"

"Why of course I heard you - eighty-five, nihety - but I wouldn't hurt that

statue of your'n - ninety-five - for the world! Not for the whole - one hundred - dad-blamed world!"

"Then what are you waiting for? I told you to get out."

"'Tain't enough."

"That's all we agreed on - you robber!"

"'Tain't enough. Reckon about fifty more would do it, though. I lost a lot of trade on account of havin' that furriner around just so's to oblige you. Folks ain't been comin' like they uster. I figger just fifty is doin' you a favor. Let's see now. If I was to put my whole mind to figgerin..."

"You haven't got a mind. You're insane. You're..."

"No. No, you said your own self I was just drunk. 'Course now if you think I'm crazy - no tellin' what I might do without even knowin' I'm doin' it... Your statue might still git..."

"Take the fifty!"

"...busted after all. (I do thank you kindly.) But I don't look for it to now."

I begun to back out of there right quick afore my guardian angel turned in his halo 'nd went to Hell for a rest.

"See you tomorrow at yer undrapin', Mrs. Fendright."

And I shut the door real fast. But I could still hear her holler - "The unveiling - you fool!"

Well I'd got you there once 'nd pulled you off again - to the mornin' of the Fourth I mean, when the statue was finally all done. First thing we did was to get hold of one of George Eames's old tarps that wasn't too dirty 'nd tie it down real tight over our Lucy. Then we rounded up some a' the boys 'nd offered 'em a bit of refreshment as we had a couple things we wanted 'em to do. They didn't even seem to mind drinkin' with a furriner, (they still didn't know

nothin' was up) they seemed so glad just to be drinkin'. Well the first thing they was to do, they done right away. With Tom helpin' and me guidin', we got her settled on my roller-top-table. Lord she was heavy. As heavy almost as Lucy Fendright looked in the flesh. I was plum tuckered out just listenin' to 'em all grunt.

We drunk another round then as there was still a little time. Pretty soon though we heared dogs barkin' 'nd horses clóppin' 'nd way, way off I thunk I could hear Lucy's old Apperson snortin' 'nd rattlin' its way into town. It was time we got movin' again. So I opened the doors for 'em and they started pushin' 'nd tuggin' the thing up the hill to the park. I sort of mosied along ahead of 'em kickin' stones 'nd shoooin' kids outen their way.

Well, it was a long haul, let me tell you - but we finally got 'er clean up to the spot. There was a nice place already all hollered out for which to set it in. Which we finally done. By then folks was buzzin' all around us... 'nd I had to swat a few of the peskier little folks on the fanny to keep 'em off. Then I felt a swat on my own setter - it was Marmie. She'd plunked me with her pocket book.

"You might of washed yer face, Samuel L. Small. Why it shames me to be seen standin' here with you."

'Nd she goes breezin' off with her nose in the air to right up front of the bandstand.

Just then I catches sight of Lucy. She was up on the bandstand with the sun just a sparklin' 'nd a glitterin' off her. She must've had on every last bit of jewel-ry she owned.

"Friends - Friends - My dear friends of Middleton..." But folks went right on a jabberin' 'nd carryin' on, not hearin' a word that syrupy 'sweet voice was cooin' to 'em. I knowed Tom 'nd me didn't have all the time in the world even

if everbody else did. So I yells,

"Everbody shut up 'nd listen," They did. "Mrs. Fendright there's been tryin' to tell you all somethin'."

I couldn't tell by the look she give me if she was tryin' to say thanks, or disprovin' me for yellin' at all her "dear friends of Middleton" durin' her big event. It didn't make no matter to me either ways. At least we was gonna git on with it.

"This, at last, is our big day, friends. Not only is it the glorious birthday of our dear country, it is something Special! Today, I am starting a new project for all of you. We are going to beautify Middleton!"

She waited so long, folks just had to clap a little.

"And to get us off to a really good beginning, I am giving you a little surprise." And she points her most glitterin' finger towards us and the statue. Which we was standin' in front of, and which was still all wrapped up. Folks just turned around 'nd grinned sort of foolish like folks will. Me 'nd Tom just sort of grinned back 'nd even bowed a little to 'em.

"Well - C'mon! Give us a look-see!"

It was old Elmer Grink, cacklin' 'nd spittin' like he always do. I shot a look at Tom 'nd could see he was as ready as I was to start amblin' off. But Lucy was on again.

"Not yet, dear friends - not yet. To get us in a fitting mood for the unveiling, I have another surprise first. Our own little Edgar Greevy is going to play his violin."

Oh how folks did shuffle 'nd rustle then. I pulled out my watch 'nd snuck a look at it. We - Tom 'nd me, that is - didn't have more'n fifteen minutes at the outside. But poor little Edgar didn't look smart enough er strong enough to play us a piéce that long; so I wasn't in too much of a stew yet.

"Tell the people what you're going to play, Edgar." But Edgar just stood there with his eyes all glassy 'nd his mouth hung open. I figgered the poor thing'd sooner wet his britches up there in front of all us folks than play the vio-lin. 'Nd from that look on his face you'd of thought that's just what he was a doin'. But Lucy give him another poke, 'nd he fell to scrapin' his fiddle. Never did tell us what that piece was - but I don't reckon it would've made no difference.

I couldn't tell by the sound, but the way folks started squirmen' in earnest, I figgered he had to be near done. He'd set our teeth on edge for near four minutes - longer than I'd of bet he could ever done, I must admit. That meant, if I'd reckoned all properly, Tom 'nd me had about eight minutes to spare - not countin' the three minutes I figgered for that little walk we was goin' to take.

Right about then the squeekin' stops 'nd there stands Edgar - all smiles and crooked teeth. Folks clapped a good deal, they was so mightily glad to be done with him. Then Lucy ups 'nd says,

"Hear how much they like you, Edgar? Now why don't you play all these nice people an encore?"

Edgar's eyes bugged like somebody was a chokin' him, 'nd his voice sounded like it too.

"I don't reckon I knows that one." And off he scoots like a rabbit outen a trap. Folks kind of laughed some - they was, I allowed, so glad he didn't know that other piece. "Here it comes," I said to myself, and gived Tom a look that said as much. I held out the fingers on one hand to show him how much time we'd got to enjoy ourselves afore we'd got to vamoose.

"Oh Mr. Bohne - Mr. Bohne -" Lucy was fairly singin' his name. "Come up and give us a little speech about our surprise." Well, I don't know what Tom's

insides done, but I knowed my stomach got real well acquainted with my toes. Then I hears Tom talkin' like his Pierre self.

"Ah - My dear Mrs. Fendright. You do to me ze great honair - but the arteest - he always prefair to let his work speak for heem!"

And I'll be burned if he didn't bow real low and smooth with his hand stuck out right nice at the statue. My stomach come home to roost. That boy was right shrewd even if'n he was from back east 'nd a artist to boot.

The people begun crowdin' toward us then, 'nd here come Lucy traipsin' off the bandstand. I passed George Eames my knife 'nd told him to cut the ropes on his tarp any time Lucy said to. He looked sort of funny at me fer a second as I guess we'd forgot to tell 'im we'd borried a tarp off'n 'im. But Tom 'nd me got no time for that now. 'Cause just then, still a good ways off down in the valley I heard it whistle - the freight was gonna be on time. So I says just as nice and quiet to Tom,

"I think it was time we was goin', Mr. Bohne."

"I'm with you, Mr. Small."

But the people was swarmin' 'nd pressin' so hard around us we'd like to never broke through 'em. Just when we did, it blew again. I grabbed out my watch. The blamed train was on time, but we wasn't. Then it come to me what we'd have to do. I grabbed Tom hard by the arm 'nd drug him along behind me. We got over to my table-top where we'd left it parked, 'nd thank God for them sore-heads - a couple or so of the boys, what never did take to the statue idea was still sulkin' right there in the road aside my contraption.

Just then it got dead still except for that train a whistlin' closer. Then it broke. The loudest conglommeration of guffawin' 'nd squealin' you ever heard. Well, Tom 'nd me'd got what we stayed for - 'nd if we wasn't right quick about it we'd of stayed too long. For bustin' outen the midst of 'em here come Lucy.

"Boys - you gotta help us. Git this here table over in the middle and aim it for the tracks!"

Then Lucy plumb screams,

"Catch him - catch that thief!"

"Git on," I says. Tom 'nd and the boys right off catches my meanin'. So me 'nd him hops on 'nd lays ourselves flat, 'nd then I says to the boys,

"Kindly remove them stones, boys, 'nd give us a little shove!"

Well they bent 'nd done it as neat as if they'd been practicin' it all day. But we could of done without the shove, for once they took them stones away from the wheels we was off! I saw just out of the tail of my eye the whole blamed town was a yellin' 'nd a herdin' towards us. Then I thunk of it - just when we was hurtlin' really good - we'd got no way to steer er stop. As if that wasn't enough for one body to consider, there it come, slowed a lot, but still movin', there come the freight down at the bottom of the hill. We was just under a block away now and pickin' up speed all the time. I thot I could hear women screamin' and danged if I didn't get a picture of Marmie all dressed in black and cryin' ever time they brought in another piece of me. I yelled.

"We gotta jump!"

I saw Tom open and shut his mouth, but if he said anything the wind blew his words clean away. I pulled my head as close to his as I could and really yowled,

"Roll off - now!"

I didn't know whether he done it or not. All I knowed was that if he had not done it, a real nice young feller'd got his 'nd it was most my fault. I felt sore all over.

Then I was plunked back into the world. Tom was not dead. He was yankin' me by the arm to git up. The freight was rollin' past us not six feet away -

real slow, but poundin' like thunder.

"Get up! We can make it!" Tom was a draggin' me now. He caught on to one of them little ladders on one of the cars - hangin' on for dear life with one hand 'nd reachin' back for me with the other.

"I can't - I can't go, boy." I was limpin' 'nd puffin' along after him.

"You can make it!" He tried to reach for me again.

"No Tom. No. I don't want to go!" 'Nd then him 'nd me was both hollerin' good luck 'nd watch yourself 'nd let's write 'nd all that while he grows littler 'nd littler 'nd the train goes faster 'nd faster. Then it come to me. I cupped my hands around my mouth 'nd heaved all I had into it:

"Look in yer pocket!" 'nd I was pattin' my side 'nd yellin' it again for all I was worth. I'd snuck the money in I'd got offen Lucy. He did look 'nd he waved 'nd I waved 'nd then I couldn't make him out no more. Just for a second it was still, 'nd peaceful, 'nd sort of sad.

But only for a second. 'Cause here they all come swoopin' 'nd hollerin' down on me 'nd, I figgered, aimin' to carry me off to the nearest hoosegow. First to get to me was Marmie 'nd damned if she don't throw her arms around me 'nd kiss me right there in front of 'em all. At that a bunch of them other silly wimmin bust out weepin' too just like they was already at my funeral.

Then Marmie sort of gurgles, "Oh Samuel - whatever did you do it for?"

Knowin' she must mean makin' that statue 'nd runnin' away after I done it all - well, I figgered I'd think up a good enough excuse to give 'er by the time she made her first visit to me in jail. Sayin', which was true, that I'd planned to send for her the minute I got offen that freight seemed downright weak 'nd onery now. So I didn't say a word. Then all of a sudden I begun to hear what they was really sayin':

"Riskin' yer neck to catch 'im!"

"We saw you fightin' 'm all the way down."

"Oh you are a proud, strong man - 'nd all fer poor Mrs. Fendright too!"

Well, I'd thought that little trip down the hill 'nd the spill offen my table had sent me clean out of the world 'nd then plunked me back in - only it'd plunked me back in upside down. I was a hero. We was walkin' back up the hill now - I ast 'em to take me back to the park. Cuss me if I wasn't be-ginnin' to feel like a hero again.

Then I saw her. Lucy Fendright was sittin' there all alone except for Lloyd Garvey. He was standin' there pattin' her hand 'nd she, I never knowed she could do it, she was cryin' into a handkerchief she got holt of with the other. For a second - just for a second - I felt sorry for her, 'nd shamed by what I done - 'nd I felt it clear through. They must of see'd us coming back 'cause they got up 'nd that's the last we seen of either of 'em for quite a spell.

Then I saw the other Lucy. Tom's 'nd my great stone Lucy. It was right hard to feel ashamed any more of such a fine piece of work - so's I give it up. When I see'd it there in the park it struck me even more wondrous. Its likeness to Lucy was even more like Lucy than Lucy was to her own self. She had on one of them pretty, sort of ripply lookin' gowns - 'course to cover some parts of Lucy it took more'n ripples; it took good-size waves. And she was poised ever so graceful on one toe with t'other foot stuck up right pert a-hind. She was sort of leant over too so you could see her face real good. Yep - there she was, - thumbin' her cold stone nose at all of Middleton.

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A CREATIVE REPORT

by

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Five original short stories are presented in this report. Through them the theme of incommunicability is traced in the introductory essay.

In the introduction, incommunicability is defined as the failure of man to communicate meaningfully with his fellow man. Because incommunicability is an ever-present fact of life, it is naturally reflected in literature. However, so much attention is given to this problem in twentieth century fiction that it has become an established theme in contemporary literature. To briefly document the definition and to supply evidence of its technical manifestation and thematic expression, three major examples are cited from twentieth century English novels.

The novelists and their works chosen are Joseph Conrad, Victory; James Joyce, Ulysses; and E. M. Forster, A Passage to India. These three were selected because they seem to clearly demonstrate the various technical and thematic approaches to the problem of incommunicability. Conrad reveals incommunicability as the great, cruel trick of life that eternally separates man from man. Though Joyce is certainly as keenly aware of the isolation imposed on man by incommunicability, his treatment of it is not so harsh as Conrad's. In contrast to Heyst's desolate isolation in Victory, Leopold Bloom in Ulysses bears his solitude with a certain quietness and poignancy. Different from either of these, is E. M. Forster's delineation of the problem through the character of Mrs. Moore in A Passage to India. She equates life and its meaningless sounds with the strange echoes of the Marabar Caves where a prayer or a scream will resound the same. The caves can be seen as an extremely effective symbol of incommunicability. Indeed, they become such an effective symbol for Mrs. Moore that once she recognizes their significance, she recedes from life and its vacant noises - man's futile attempt to communicate.

The five stories of this report also reflect various aspects of the problem

of incommunicability. A progression of intensity and consequence of the failure to communicate may be traced in them if they are read in the order outlined in the introduction.